

CLEAN AS A PIG: A STUDY OF IRONY AND PARADOX IN  
THE MAJOR WORKS OF CARSON McCULLERS

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by  
Joanne Brown  
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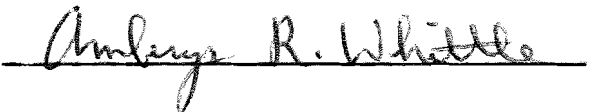
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Approved by Committee:

  
Chairman

  
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Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The function of the artist is to execute his own indigenous vision, and having done that, to keep faith with this vision.

--Carson McCullers<sup>1</sup>

Fiercely true to her own dictum, Carson McCullers discovered in her first novel the major theme which was to absorb her for the remainder of her literary career. "Spiritual isolation is the basis of most of my work," she has written. "My first book was concerned with this, almost entirely, and all of my books since, in one way or another."<sup>2</sup> It is a given condition of the McCullers' world, a motif upon which many variations can be played, and she has done so with great technical virtuosity, but her initial perception that man is doomed to his own loneliness contains a finality so precise that no retreat or illusion is ultimately possible.

Every writer has his own angle of vision from which he views the raw materials of his art. For some, the view is expansive and panoramic; for others, such as Carson McCullers, it is narrowly telescoped. This is not to imply

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<sup>1</sup>Carson McCullers, "The Vision Shared," Theatre Arts, XXXIV (April, 1950), 28.

<sup>2</sup>Carson McCullers, "The Flowering Dream: Notes on Writing," Esquire, LII (December, 1959), 162.

that her work lacks complexity, but rather, in the words of one critic, that "she plows a deep furrow."<sup>1</sup> Her exacting, poetic prose has explored the multi-faceted implications of human loneliness on nearly every level, on the symbolic and the realistic, on the physical and the psychological, on the sociological and individualistic.

Mrs. McCullers' conclusions are as melancholy as her initial premise. Inferring that love is the only force capable of redeeming man from his essential isolation, she goes on to illustrate, using characters and situations specifically designed to exemplify her thesis, that love is never completely reciprocal and is inevitably beset by frustrations, misunderstandings, and the erosion of time. Despite poignant attempts on the part of her fictional personalities to establish even imperfect rapport with other human beings, true communication remains an ultimate impossibility. The soul repeatedly selects its own society--but upon shutting the door, confronts not the chosen companion but terrifying loneliness. Lacking sensitivity to the feeling of others and having even less understanding of themselves, Mrs. McCullers' characters only intensify the alienation they attempt to alleviate. Each individual is surrounded by a

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<sup>1</sup>Frances Downing, Commonweal, XLIV (May 24, 1946), 148.

"zone of loneliness,"<sup>1</sup> walled off from community, from family, from friends, and from himself as well. The vision of Carson McCullers', then, is one of disjunction and disunity.

It is out of this same sense of alientation and its consequent isolation that the American novel and its characteristic mode of expression has sprung. Classic American fiction, in marked contrast to the English novel, has dealt less with the lives of men in society than with the inner life of the solitary man wrestling with himself. From Natty Bumppo through Ahab and Huck Finn, down to Gatsby and Thomas Sutpen, the typical American literary hero has emerged as a stubbornly unconforming individual, depicted not in the process of discovering himself in and through society, but as a loner profoundly alienated from the social structure--lighting out, as it were, for the territory.

This angle of vision, this chasm between one's self and the world that modern life has magnified, results in a highly subjective fiction, what Richard Chase has dubbed "a profound poetry of disorder."<sup>2</sup> Its contraction into a more poetic cast acknowledges its incapacity to share widely in

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<sup>1</sup>Carson McCullers, The Square Root of Wonderful (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), p. 48.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Chase, The American Novel and Its Tradition (New York: Doubleday, 1957), p. 2.

affairs of this world, and its introversion of form has increasingly shifted the emphasis from outward action to inward reaction, where invention and surprise are found not in plot but in the contemplation of the characters themselves.

Such symbolic rendering of experience, with its close kinship to the works of Hawthorne and Melville, is the mode in which the vision of Carson McCullers has found expression. Her conception of fiction is chiefly that of a parable, with the narrative burden of the work secondary to that of the allegorical.<sup>1</sup> This has misled many critics into charging her with an unwise selection of characters and situations. "It is a narrow corner of human existence she has chosen to explore," wrote one,<sup>2</sup> while another complained that her novels "are a series of disclosures, as at a psychoanalyst's, . . . designed to make us sympathize with the twig as it is bent the wrong way."<sup>3</sup> But because Mrs. McCullers is writing primarily on the symbolic or even allegorical level, her fictional world, with its freakish heroes and implausible situations, is not intended as a realistic transcription of everyday life. As she herself has explained,

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<sup>1</sup>Oliver Evans, "The Achievement of Carson McCullers," English Journal, LI (May, 1962), 301.

<sup>2</sup>Chester E. Eisinger, Fiction of the Forties (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 258.

<sup>3</sup>Alfred Kazin, Contemporaries (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1962), p. 208.

Love, and especially love of a person who is incapable of returning or receiving it, is at the heart of my selection of grotesque figures to write about--people whose physical incapacity is a symbol of their spiritual incapacity to love or receive love--their spiritual isolation.<sup>1</sup>

Carson McCullers is frequently classed as a writer of the Southern Gothic School, a school supposedly concerned with the grotesque and abnormal, with an outlandish love for the morbid. Although her novels in many respects qualify her for membership in this group, such a label misses the essential point. Behind the strange and horrible in her world are played out the most somber misfortunes of the human spirit. Her victim-heroes speak of frustrations so native to the human condition that they are perhaps only recognized in the shock which comes from seeing them costumed in grotesque attire. Daily they move among us, being only heeded when they carry a hump on their backs:

The novelist . . . will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>McCullers, "The Flowering Dream," loc. cit.

<sup>2</sup>Flannery O'Connor, The Living Novel, as quoted by Ihab Hassan, "The Victim: Images of Evil in Recent American Fiction," College English, XXI (December, 1959), 145.



Yet the artist's personal vision, if it is to be successfully translated into a meaningful work of art, must touch and illuminate at certain points the world to which all art makes, however obliquely, its final reference: the world of literal reality. Granting that distortions of character and situation may validly serve a symbolic purpose, the reader must nevertheless be able to recognize the symbols and what the author means by them. As Ihab Hassan points out, "Alienation, like monstrosity, can become a dramatic condition only when viewed against these special norms--however vestigial--which make divergence from them meaningful."<sup>1</sup>

In Mrs. McCullers' world there are signposts pointing to (or rather hinting at) such norms. For one thing, she is thoroughly in command of the devices of realism. Her most effective characterizations--Singer, Frankie, Malone--achieve the three-dimensional effect of fully realized human beings, despite their symbolic value. Her dialogue is accurate; the relationships between characters, where not deliberately inexplicable and outlandish (as in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe) are poignant and convincing. Like Defoe, she anchors a fabulous world of the imagination to everyday believability

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<sup>1</sup>Ihab Hassan, Radical Innocence (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 207.

with a profusion of carefully planned detail. Yet this competent realism has not always worked to her advantage. In allegory, "the realistic level" must remain secondary to the symbolic, as in Kafka. His characters, although less convincing as human beings than Mrs. McCullers', are more effective as symbols. In the novels of Carson McCullers the difficulty sometimes lies in weighing the realistic elements against the allegorical to correctly assess the meaning of the work. At times, notably in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter and Clock Without Hands, the allegorical and realistic levels tend to struggle with each other, creating a certain amount of compromise and confusion on both.

The single ingredient which most helps to extend Carson McCullers' frame of reference beyond the small Southern mill town, inhabited by the *outré* characters who people her novels, is the severely controlled tone of irony which marks her work. The reader, although persuaded to sympathize with the assorted defectives, cripples, and adolescents, is not necessarily encouraged to identify with them. Rather, their deviations and frustrations are measured against the magnificence with which their purest hopes and dreams are portrayed. In their search for the "we of me," as Frankie Addams so poignantly phrases it, what could be is gauged against the cruelty of what is; the resultant tension between the two creates a pervasive irony.

Her central characters are the offspring of irony, the mediators of polar claims. They cut across lines of good and evil, simultaneously engaging both the sympathy and revulsion of the reader. Failing in a chaotic world to achieve a full measure of knowledge and self-realization, where defeat acquires a meaning that transcends the fact of defeat, they are never tragic figures in the classic sense; suffering intensely from their physical and spiritual shortcomings, neither are they comic figures of harmless compromise. Tragedy depends upon a moral universe--one not totally inscrutable--and comedy insists upon at least some degree of rationality, upon a fixed social order.

But freaks and monsters are the subject of veiled mockery; their abnormality shocks and shames us into ironic laughter. This is why the comedy of the grotesque often seems acerb. Only children can laugh at hunchbacks or fanatics with glee. Adults learn to transform their discomfort into irony, which serves to domesticate the monsters roaming the inner landscapes of the soul.<sup>1</sup>

Such irony helps to lift the body of Mrs. McCullers' work from the merely "Gothic" genre and center it more squarely in a universal context by clarifying her broad thematic concerns: for instance, it becomes obvious that in depicting the passionate relationship between two deaf mutes, the author is making a paradoxical statement about the need for human communication. The twin qualities of

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<sup>1</sup>Ihab Hassan, "Laughter in the Dark," American Scholar, XXXIII (Autumn, 1964), 638.

deafness and dumbness simply underscore the necessity. It is as if the reader must construct the universal world from photographic negatives, reversing the more extreme values from black to white, white to black. As Carson McCullers has written, "Paradox is a clue to communication, for what is not often leads to the awareness of what is."<sup>1</sup>

The ironic tone is maintained in varying degrees by several devices. Each novel revolves around a central paradox of human existence, which gives rise to a series of lesser paradoxes. The carefully projected disjunction between idealism and reality which haunts her work corresponds to a thematic juxtaposition of such opposing elements as love and pain, hope and disenchantment, self and society, innocence and guilt. Suspended between these antitheses, the characters struggle within themselves and against each other. The ambiguities which result both complement and reinforce the initial paradox, while the ironic distance established at the outset precludes any possibility of the author categorizing the relative values of the emotional content.

This strictly observed objectivity has certain affinities with the Russian literature of the nineteenth century, for in its approach to life and suffering, there are similarities of techniques: "The technique briefly is this: a bold and outwardly callous juxtaposition of the

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<sup>1</sup>McCullers, "The Flowering Dream," p. 163.

tragic with the humorous, the immense with the trivial, the sacred with the bawdy, the whole soul of a man with a materialistic detail."<sup>1</sup> Carson McCullers was referring specifically to Dostoievsky, but--although the article appeared early in her literary career--she might well have been describing her own approach.

Many critics have drawn parallels between the circumstances which have fostered the rise of contemporary Southern literature and those which produced the Russian novels of the nineteenth century, pointing to the Southern tradition of a relatively primitive folk culture among the Negroes and poor whites, a bourgeois culture in the cities and the trappings of a decrepit but still pretentious agrarian aristocracy, all of which elements put the Southern writer in a position somewhat similar to that of the Russian novelists of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

To this list of correlatives, Mrs. McCullers adds,

. . . it is rare, except in the works of the Russians and the Southerners, that [farce and tragedy] are superimposed one upon the other so that their effects are experienced simultaneously. . . . The South and old Russia have much in common sociologically. . . . In both . . . the cheapness of life is realized at every turn. Life is plentiful; children are born and they die, or if they do not die they live and struggle.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Carson McCullers, "The Russian Realists and Southern Literature," Decision, II (July, 1941), 15.

<sup>2</sup>Isaac Rosenfeld, New Republic, CXIV (April 29, 1946), 633.

<sup>3</sup>McCullers, "The Russian Realists and Southern Literature," p. 19.

Perhaps this objective fusion of anguish and farce, this view of life as a tragi-comedy, helps to account for the recent profusion of grotesque literature which emerged in the 1940's. Against a background of cosmic pointlessness, this sub-genre has filtered the harsher truths of life through a rigidly controlled art form. The symbolic, synthetic horror encloses a truth, but one without the sting of reality. The challenge of the form is to attain dramatic objectivity through utilizing the resources of universal experience.

Through a successive examination of each of Carson McCullers' five major works, this thesis will explore the central paradox of each novel and the paradoxes of character and situation as they relate to basic thematic concerns, investigate the consequent ambiguities and tensions as they contribute to the maintenance of the author's ironic distance, and demonstrate that the widened frame of reference which results creates from each of Mrs. McCullers' grotesques a symbolically universal character, an Everyman with a hump on his back.

## CHAPTER II

### THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER

And God stepped out on space  
And He looked around and said,  
"I'm lonely--I'll make me a man."  
The Creation,  
James Weldon Johnson

The idea of God creating man in His image to assuage His loneliness is a time-honored and revered one; the reverse conception, that of man forming a God-figure in his mortal likeness, is neither. Yet this is the basic situation in The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter, where the major characters are as vastly isolated in their populous universe as was the Old Testament Jehovah in his desolate cosmos.

The story revolves around John Singer, a deaf mute to whom the other major characters are attracted: Biff Brannon, the proprietor of the New York Cafe, who, like T. S. Eliot's prophet Tiresias, is sexually ambivalent and watches the events in his cafe (a microcosm of the world) with an attitude half objective, half compassionate; Mick Kelly, the adolescent tomboy in whose home Singer rooms and who is forced to exchange her dream of becoming a concert pianist for the reality of clerking in a dime store; Jake Blount, the alcoholic Marxist reformer who wants justice but does violence; and Doctor Benedict Copeland, the agnostic

Negro physician whose fierce dedication to the "strong, true purpose" of bettering his race has destroyed his health and alienated his family. Each comes often to Singer's room, "for they felt that the mute would always understand whatever they wanted to say to him. And maybe more than that."<sup>1</sup> Singer, in turn, lavishes his affections upon another deaf mute, the moronic Spiros Antonopoulos, who is confined to a mental institution early in the novel. When Antonopoulos dies, Singer commits suicide.

It is easy to see why Mrs. McCullers' material has attracted charges of "sensationalism." A cataloguing of the afflictions from which the characters suffer (deafness, dumbness, alcoholism, tuberculosis, cancer, nephritis, gangrene, sexual deviations, idiocy) is ludicrous. The action encompasses natural death, murder, suicide, torture, and maiming. The Southern setting, which maintains a fabled anonymity, is a small, isolated mill town where the sun is as searing as the sense of individual alienation, an "alien land,"<sup>2</sup> "more lonesome than any place."<sup>3</sup> What value, beyond that of gothic fascination, does this nightmare-haunted world hold for the reader, and what does it contribute to the basic viewpoint expressed in the title?

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<sup>1</sup>Carson McCullers, The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1953), p. 81.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 173.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 50.



The paradox at the core of the novel is the spiritual loneliness of the individual in a world full of lonely people. As Mick reflects, "It was funny, too, how lonesome a person could be in a crowded house."<sup>1</sup> The need for love--which in this novel is very nearly synonymous with fraternal understanding--comprises the theme.

The plot follows the four satellite figures as they seek for love and understanding from the various starting points of adolescence, socialism, racial subordination, and objective curiosity.

To reinforce the central paradox, the major characters each embody certain ironic, disparate traits. The most obvious of these is the mute, John Singer, whose very name is a contradiction of his physical handicap. However, in a manner reminiscent of the shepherd on Keats' Grecian urn, Singer's unspoken, unheard melodies of the heart are more eloquent than the vocally articulate communications of the others. It is an eloquence born of selflessness; he asks--and receives--no more than that Antonopoulos be a repository for his affections. This uncritical devotion touches Singer with the charisma to which the others are initially drawn, but as the story progresses, a further irony develops: the mute occupies his venerated position

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

not because of any intrinsic excellence of character but, to the contrary, because he cannot make himself known as an individual to others. What they see in him is not what is there but what they wish to find. Biff Brannon correctly perceives that "Blount and Mick made of him a sort of home-made God. Owing to the fact he was a mute they were able to give him all the qualities they wanted him to have."<sup>1</sup>

This reaction is mirrored to a lesser degree by the behavior of the townspeople:

The Jews said he was a Jew. The merchants along main-street said he received a large legacy and was a very rich man. It was whispered in one browbeaten textile union that the mute was an organizer for the C.I.O.<sup>2</sup>

The rich thought that he was rich and the poor considered him a poor man like themselves. And as there was no way to disprove these rumors they grew marvelous and very real. Each man described the mute as he wished him to be.<sup>3</sup>

Singer's new status pushes him into a role which reverses his former relationship with Antonopoulos. In both a literal and figurative sense, Singer had followed where the Greek had led; now, through no deliberate efforts of his own, he finds himself propelled into the position of leader and guide. "[Jake] always followed and expected Singer to lead."<sup>4</sup>

The mute is as perplexed with his new friends as with his new role. Despite the frequency of their visits and the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 198.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 170.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 190.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 133.

earnestness of their disclosures, each remains an enigma to him. Of Blount, he writes to Antonopoulos, "The one with the moustache I think is crazy. . . . He thinks he and I have a secret together but I do not know what it is."<sup>1</sup> Of Mick: "She knows I am deaf but she thinks I know about music."<sup>2</sup> Of Copeland: "This black man frightens me sometimes. His eyes are hot and bright."<sup>3</sup>

Singer's bewilderment stems not only from his physical limitations, but also from his over-riding absorption in his own loneliness and need for Antonopoulos. What the others interpret as profound understanding is simply quiet courtesy. Significantly, after Antonopoulos is committed to the asylum, Singer keeps his hands in his pockets. Fluent in sign language, his once familiar means of communication is deliberately restrained.

The ultimate irony of the character relationships lies in the manner in which Singer confers upon the idiotic Antonopoulos the same omnipotent wisdom with which the others invest him. It "seemed to Singer that there was something very subtle and wise in this smile of his friend,"<sup>4</sup> that he "seemed like some wise king from a legend."<sup>5</sup> Despite the fact that the Greek is a grotesque and obese half-wit with exhibitionistic and onanistic aberrations, Singer is as convinced

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 190.

of his friend's understanding as the reader is positive of the failure of that understanding. Their friendship reflects as well as creates the larger context in which all the characters function.

Singer has perceived that Copeland, Blount, and Mick each "have something they hate. And they all have something they love more than eating or sleeping or wine or friendly company."<sup>1</sup> There is truth in this observation; each character is torn by antagonistic impulses. But because the psychological boundaries between love and hate are often fuzzy or non-existent, each is touched with a further ambivalence.

The Negro physician, Benedict Copeland, loves his people and hates their white oppressors. It is as simple as that, and as complicated, for he unknowingly strives to remake the Negro in the image of the white man, vehemently discounting the value of black folk culture and tradition. Although an educated and articulate man, he can communicate neither with his people in general nor with his own children in particular, except to elucidate the meaning of the strong, true purpose: "If he could not speak the whole truth no other word would come to him."<sup>2</sup> His daughter Portia reprimands him,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 182-183.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 126.

Hamilton or Buddy or Willie or me--none of us ever cares to talk like you. Us talk like our own Mama and her peoples and their peoples before them. You think out everything in your brain. While us rather talk from something in our hearts that has been there for a long time.<sup>1</sup>

Respected but held in awe by the Negro community, he unexpectedly turns to a member of the detested white race for the understanding denied him by his own people. Dedicated to healing others, he neglects his own tubercular condition. His name, like Singer's, is an ironic distortion of the facts: he cannot cope with the problems to which his zeal has led him, nor can he cope with the frustrations growing out of his inability to do so.

Ideologically, Jake Blount provides a neat parallel to Copeland's position. He, too, is obsessed by the need for social justice, but in an economic, not racial, context. Karl Marx is his hero, capitalistic oppression his declared enemy--although his private being is ranged against the twin demons of alcoholism and loneliness. Like Copeland, he feels a knowing superiority over those whose cause he espouses and fails equally to reach them, "talking and talking and not ever getting anybody to understand what he meant."<sup>2</sup> Whereas Copeland's effectiveness as a reformer is negated by his disavowal of his racial heritage, Blount's efficacy is blunted (as his name implies) by his self-contempt, illustrated during

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

a sober interval when he discards his filthy blue jeans (earlier an identifying emblem) in the garbage can.

His psychological instability is reflected in his physical appearance. "It was like something was deformed about him--but when you looked at him closely each part of him was normal and as it ought to be. Therefore if this difference was not in the body it was probably in the mind."<sup>1</sup>

Despite his atheistic dedication to Marxism, Blount bears the stigmata of a former religious fury, but his pseudo-resurrection has proved secular and self-defeating. His Whitmanesque braggadocio ("I'm part nigger and wop and bohunk and chink. All of those. . . . And I'm Dutch and Turkish and Japanese and American,")<sup>2</sup> is immediately belied by his confession of loneliness: "I'm a stranger in a strange land."

Blount sees the world as divided between the "knows" and "don't knows," with only himself and Singer in the former category; the unreality of his views and the circuitous direction of his life are symbolized by the merry-go-round which he operates at the Sunny Dixie show: "He adjusted a lever and the thin jangle of mechanical music began. The wooden cavalcade around them seemed to cut them off from the rest of the world."<sup>3</sup> The musical reference is suggestive of Blount's incessant haranguing. Yoked by abstractions and split by contradictory motives, he is immobilized by the force of his unchanneled energies.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 54.

Mick also sees the world as divided, but between the ideal and the real world, between her "inner" and "outer" rooms. In the inner room she keeps the stuff of which dreams are made. Music--of which she has little academic knowledge but much intuitive appreciation--occupies a large part of this room. It is the thing she loves most, a focal point for her ambitions and her hopes. Singer is the only other person presently admitted to the inner sanctuary. In the outer room are school, her family--all of the realistic accouterments that impinge on her private self and which in her paintings she depicts as violent and threatening.

The world is split in another way for Mick too, between the realities of childhood and maturity. When the novel opens, Mick is thirteen, balancing between the two spheres, reluctant to abandon the charm of the former and longing for the independence of the latter, yet unwilling to pay the exacting price of innocence.

Her short-cropped hair, boyish clothes and ambiguous name hint at a still further division of her impulses, a warring between the male and female sides of her nature; growing up for her is as much a matter of sexual determination as increased sexual awareness. Her party marks the first step in the transition from tomboy to woman, her sexual experience with Harry an initiation into adulthood; when she takes the job in

the dime store, confirming her presentiment "that there was no good place,"<sup>1</sup> the defiant hoyden of the earlier chapters has succumbed to the inescapable. Her dreams have proved as earthbound as Mick herself, who in a previous episode reluctantly abandons her rooftop porch while musing, "Coming down was the hardest part of any climbing."<sup>2</sup>

Of the four satellite characters, Biff Brannon is the most balanced and provides a norm of sorts that gives added perspective to the other characters. In contrast to the driving passions of Copeland, Blount and Mick, Biff maintains an impersonal objectivity, a quality which his sister-in-law pinpoints when she tells him that "you got a real reason for every single thing you ever do. Your mind runs by reasons instead of just wants."<sup>3</sup>

And yet he, too, is caught in the tug of ambivalent tendencies. Emotionally estranged from his wife Alice, (they call each other Mister and Misses Brannon), and prematurely impotent in his mid-forties, he appears to be "a hard man of middle height, with a beard so dark and heavy that the lower part of his face looked as though it were molded of iron."<sup>4</sup> But the heavy beard and iron jaw--typically masculine badges--gainsay the maternal instincts he harbors for the lonely

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 9.



freaks and misfits who patronize his restaurant. He cherishes an especial tenderness for Mick and daydreams of adopting children for whom he will fashion red velvet outfits. After Alice's death, he inadvertently assumes several of her feminine whims that he had ridiculed while she was alive, regularly treating his hair with her lemon rinse and dabbing his wrists and ears with her perfume.

Ironically, although he is quick to perceive the quirks in others, he rationalizes his own behavior as universally normal:

And on that subject why was it that the smartest people mostly missed that point? By nature all people are both sexes. So that marriage and the bed is not all by any means. The proof? Real youth and old age. Because old men's voices grow high and reedy and they take on a mincing walk. And old women sometimes grow fat and their voices get rough and deep and they grow dark little mustaches. And he even proved it himself--the part of him that sometimes almost wished he was a mother and Mick and Baby were his kids.<sup>1</sup>

His desire for a child is mocked by Alice's final illness, when "the doctor . . . removed from her a tumor almost the size of a newborn child."<sup>2</sup> Instead of a new life, Alice has borne a living death. Like the other characters, Biff is victimized by the very dreams that have sustained his dignity.

It is not difficult to see how Carson McCullers' theme of spiritual isolation emerges from the actions and interactions of such characters. Physical deformity, freakishness

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 112-113.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 103.

and psychological imbalance are ready symbols of human alienation. Karl Menniger has stated that "the most frequent and serious factor leading to a lonely personality is a real or fancied defect or unfavorable comparison."<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, by creating such bizarre characters cut off from the ordinary realm of existence (despite the political and sociological references), Mrs. McCullers is able to concentrate on the urgency of their emotional needs. Her cast of cripples--psychologically or physically incomplete--can become whole only by entering into a productive relationship with another human being. All alternatives are automatically stripped away by the grotesque nature of the material.

The irony resides in the fact that Copeland, Blount, and Mick, rather than subordinating themselves to another, only discover in the object of their affections an alter-ego, a perfected and fulfilled self, a narcissistic mirror. Mistaking Singer's patient silence for encouragement, they gradually turn inward, confirming the isolation of the self. Similarly, Brannon's maternal-paternal attraction to Mick answers his private sexual needs by supplying in himself the female as well as the male role. Singer selects the most repulsive character in the novel as the object of his affections. There seems to be little correlation between the lover's subjective view of the beloved and the existent

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<sup>1</sup>Winifred L. Dusenbury, The Theme of Loneliness in Modern American Drama (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1960), p. 2.

individual; any satisfaction derived by the lover must be created by himself alone, in his "inner room," as it were.

Therefore, if what men see in other men whom they love or admire is not what is there but what they hope to find, it becomes obvious that a character most illustrative of this theory is one grossly repellent or freakish but nevertheless capable of stimulating love.<sup>1</sup> Again, the author has chosen her improbable characters to didactically exemplify a point about the illusory nature of love, not simply to gain from the heightening of interest aroused by things abnormal or perverted.

The essential separateness of each individual is played out in the novel on several levels. Mrs. McCullers has said "the form of the book is contrapuntal throughout."<sup>2</sup> There are alternating chapters devoted in turn to each of the five main characters and a distinct style of writing for each. For example, Mick's chapters simulate a slangy spontaneity in the liberal use of improper syntax ("Mick put the pictures back on the closet shelf. None of them were any good much,")<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Carson McCullers develops this idea in greater depth in The Ballad of The Sad Cafe. See Chap. V, pp. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup>Oliver Evans, The Ballad of Carson McCullers (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1966), p. 215.

<sup>3</sup>McCullers, Heart, p. 37.

vigorous, casual verbs (" . . . every time it was like some part of her would bust in a hundred pieces,")<sup>1</sup> and overworking certain favorite expressions such as "O.K." and "good." Copeland's chapters are formal in contrast, implying a distinctly exalted vocabulary and frequent repetition of the phrase "the strong true purpose": "Tonight he read Spinoza. He did not wholly understand the intricate play of ideas and the complex phrases, but as he read he sensed a strong, true purpose behind the words and he felt that he almost understood."<sup>2</sup>

Short, abrupt sentences with little or no inverted order, a direct, down-to-earth vocabulary, and a stream of keen observations distinguish Biff Brannon's chapters: "A foreign voice was now speaking over the radio. He could not decide for certain whether the voice was German, French, or Spanish. But it sounded like doom. It gave him the jitters to listen to it. When he turned it off the silence was deep and unbroken." Jake's sections are marked by rough, masculine words (belly, youngum, Christ!, codger, floozy) and proportionately more dialogue, for his tirades, directly quoted, are lengthy and frequent.

This adaptation of style to viewpoint comes as close to the inner psychological workings of each as possible without resorting to the stream-of-consciousness method; the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 305.

alternating of focus, the counterpointing of personalities results in additional character depth and luster.<sup>1</sup>

The chapters centering on Singer are treated objectively in a simple declarative style with the emphasis on visual impressions. This helps to convey a flatness, a lack of dimension simulating Singer's handicap. The other chapters, utilizing the language appropriate to the character through whose eyes the events are seen, borrow rhythm and color from the immediate background of each. It is a style of writing that infuses the general legendary tone of the novel with sharply reported vernacular speech and reflection, transcending the provincial while retaining its strength as a vehicle. The effect bears some resemblance to Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury, a circling in on the same material from different angles.

Each character is thus separated from the others by style and structure as well as by the situations inherent in the plot. This compartmentalizing underscores the isolation so acutely felt by each and additionally operates as an

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<sup>1</sup>Carson McCullers has admitted in a more practical vein that the alternating chapters were deliberately written to stand alone if necessary so that they could be sold separately as short stories to magazines. See Simeon M. Smith, Carson McCullers: A Critical Introduction, unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1964, p. 14.

ironic foil to other images which rearrange the characters in connective patterns. The first of these devices is the wheel symbol. It effectively illustrates not only the separateness of Copeland, Blount, Brannon, and Mick from each other, but their joint dependence on the mute as well. After coming individually to Singer's room over a period of months, they chance to descend upon him simultaneously. The ensuing scene climaxes the understanding-misunderstanding dichotomy so pivotal to the novel. "Always each of them had so much to say. Yet now that they were together they were silent."<sup>1</sup> Each resents the presence of the other three, seeing his own friendship with the mute as exclusive, and never suspecting that Singer fulfills the same function of confidante and ideal for all. They find it impossible to observe even the simple social amenities between themselves. "Each person addressed his words mainly to the mute. Their thoughts seemed to converge in him as the spokes of a wheel lead to the center hub."<sup>2</sup> Finally they exchange meaningless observations about that most desultory of topics, the weather, and depart.

The incident points up what Ihab Hassan has termed an "ironic void" in the structure of this grouping, a void of love as of authority.<sup>3</sup> Each character is so totally gripped

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<sup>1</sup>McCullers, Heart, p. 79.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>3</sup>Hassan, Radical Innocence, p. 214.

by the desire to be understood that he remains insensitive to the infinitely more difficult task of attempting to understand. The figure at the hub of the wheel, not recognizing his central position and unable to cope with the awkward situation, confides his bewilderment that same evening in a letter to Antonopoulos. This letter, like all others he writes to his friend, is never mailed because the Greek is illiterate.

They all came to my room at the same time today. They sat like they were from different cities. They were even rude, and you know how I have always said that to be rude and not attend to the feelings of others is wrong. So it was like that. I do not understand, so I write it to you because I think you will understand.<sup>1</sup>

The irony in the last sentence is obvious. Antonopoulos is as a delusory symbol of understanding to Singer as Singer is to his visitors. If the wheel image corresponded to the actual situation, a mutually supportive relationship between the hub and the spokes would result. But the center--dependent upon a grotesque half-wit for stability--indeed does not hold. Any hope of understanding is illusory, and after Singer's suicide, things fall apart in four directions as each satellite character readjusts to a world without the mute.

Running counter to the satellite and wheel image is the pyramidal arrangement that appears in Singer's dream:

There were dull yellow lanterns lighting up a dark flight of stone steps. Antonopoulos kneeled at the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 184.

top of these steps. He was naked and he fumbled with something that he held above his head and gazed at it as though in prayer. He himself knelt halfway down the steps. He was naked and cold and could not take his eyes from Antonopoulos and the thing he held above him. Behind him on the ground he felt the one with the mustache and the girl and the black man and the last one. They knelt naked and he felt their eyes on him. And behind them there were uncounted crowds of kneeling people in the darkness. . . . Then suddenly there was a ferment. In the upheaval the steps collapsed and he felt himself falling downward.<sup>1</sup>

The pattern here as graphically defined represents the relationships in the novel in a hierarchal form: Brannon, Cope-land, Blount, and Mick focus on Singer, their God image, who turns his gaze on his private God, Antonopoulos. The four at the base of the pyramid have no knowledge of the one at the top. This structure collapses in the dream, foreshadowing the events in the story, for it is a hierarchy based on a profound misunderstanding of the individual in the immediately higher rank, and with no solidarity or cohesion at the base.<sup>2</sup>

There is still another grouping of characters which is at variance with both the wheel and pyramid image, and which is drawn from the chronological order of character focus and chapter arrangement in parts one and three. The first chapter introduces the two mutes and banishes

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>2</sup>Frank Durham has elaborated upon the religious significance of this pyramidal hierarchy at some length. See "God and No God in The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter," South Atlantic Quarterly, LVI (Autumn, 1957), 494-499.



Antonopoulos to the mental institution, establishing a pattern of introduction, formation of friendship, and subsequent bereavement that is played out in the lives of the other characters. The others are treated in part one in the following order: chapter two centers on Brannon, three on Mick, four on Blount, and five on Copeland. Numerous other characters, whose actions parallel and counterpoint the central theme, enter into the novel, but they are clearly subsidiary. Chapter six, the last of the first part, swings back to Singer again and establishes the dependence of the other four upon him.

Part two of the novel is the longest and most diffuse, treating the events of an entire year. The time span of part three is identical to that of chapters two, three, four, and five of part one, covering only a twenty-four hour period. This intentional correspondence of parts one and three is further clarified by the conformity of the chapter arrangement, so that the secondary characters exist in part three in exactly the reverse order from which they were introduced in part one. Copeland is succeeded by Blount and then Mick, with the final chapter dwelling on Biff Brannon. An appraisal of the quartet's respective commitments and the viability of their philosophies following Singer's death seems to indicate that the least effective characters appear in the innermost positions.

Paradoxically, their philosophies have grown out of the mutual isolation which confounds each character but which carries within it the seeds of regeneration--the need to believe. Yet so private and self-absorbing is the belief of each that their isolation is only reinforced, completing the circle through which none can break. On this level, the novel is a succession of limited ideals, and the tensions spring from the juxtapositions of the dangers and the benefits of the personal vision; it is the refusal to advance beyond this impasse which leads to frustration and further illusions.

Copeland, Blount, and Mick lack any sense of responsibility for Singer's suicide and thus remain unaware of their own roles in heightening his terrible isolation. Had they recognized the implications of his death--that human beings are morally responsible to more than their own personal ideals--the realization might have proved a redemptive force. As it is, each is committed only to the fulfillment of his own individual quest.

Each of these quests is played off against still another quest, whose nature is contained in a passage which Biff's wife reads aloud from her Sunday School lesson. The text, from Chapter One of Mark, Verses 16-37, describes Christ gathering together his disciples and concludes with

the quotation, "All men seek for Thee."<sup>1</sup> But the "Thee" in this case is a chimerical extension of individual egos, a sounding board for separate passions. All men seek for--themselves.<sup>2</sup>

After Singer's death, a purple chalk message proclaims, "He Died to Save You;"<sup>3</sup> again, "He" in the larger, ironical context can only refer to the private dreams of which Singer was the "home-made" embodiment and by which each character must eventually sink or swim. The nature of their individual fates after Singer's death illuminates some aspects of the truth-and-illusion motif to which Mrs. McCullers has related her central theme of spiritual isolation.

Copeland is taken to his father-in-law's to live, a weakened and defeated man. "Out of all the years he could think of no work of lasting value."<sup>4</sup> His hopes for racial equality have perished simultaneously with the mute. Blount's mission has also collapsed, its failure symbolized by the outbreak of violence at the carnival. "He had given Singer everything and then the man had killed himself. So he was left out on a limb."<sup>5</sup> Blount, however, is not entirely abandoned to

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<sup>1</sup>McCullers, Heart, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup>Carson McCullers originally contemplated calling her novel Fisher of Men, a quotation from the same New Testament passage. Her final manuscript was entitled The Mute. The actual title under which the novel appeared was suggested by Hardwicke Moseley of Houghton Mifflin. Smith, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>3</sup>McCullers, Heart, p. 290. <sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 283.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 295.

despair; whereas Copeland faces only certain death, Blount leaves town to begin another--if futile--chapter. "The road ahead lay to the north and slightly to the west. But he would not go too far away. He would not leave the South. That was one clear thing. There was hope in him, and soon perhaps the outline of his journey would take form."<sup>1</sup> The reader, aware of Blount's wasted energies in the past, can recognize the irony inherent in the hope.

Mick, in whom the reality-illusion conflict is strongly dramatized, is less a victim of her own shortcomings than the flawed system of the adult world, whose outward attitude is epitomized in the Woolworth motto, "Keep on your toes and smile."<sup>2</sup> In a previous episode, when Mick's efforts to convert a ukelele into a violin have failed, she still clutched at a remnant of illusion: "It seemed to her as she thought back over the last month that she had never really believed in her mind that the violin would work. But in her heart she had kept making herself believe. And even now it was hard not to believe a little."<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, now trapped behind a counter in costume jewelry and denied easy access to the inside room, she insists that the old idealism was not entirely without meaning:

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 299.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

Maybe she would get a chance soon. Else what the hell good had it all been--the way she felt about music and the plans she had made in the inside room? It had to be some good if anything made sense. And it was too and it was too and it was too and it was too. It was some good.

All right!

O.K.!

Some good.<sup>1</sup>

Significantly, only Biff (who alone has never tried to reshape the mute into an illusive extension of his own dreams) is concerned about Singer's motives in committing suicide. In contrast to the other characters, he reacts to the death with neither a sense of bereavement nor betrayal, but with a bewildered sense of human responsibility gone amiss:

The riddle. The question that had taken root in him and would not let him rest. The puzzle of Singer and rest of them. More than a year had gone by since it had started. . . . And the riddle was still in him, so that he could not be tranquil. There was something not natural about it all--something like an ugly joke. When he thought of it he felt uneasy and in some unknown way afraid.<sup>2</sup>

The novel's concluding chapter centers on him, the least ardent and most objective of the characters. Because of his clarity of perception demonstrated in earlier instances, his viewpoint has gained moral credence. His chapter, occurring shortly before midnight on August 21, 1939, coincides with the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 302.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 305-306.

outbreak of World War II, as a radio newscaster spews out facts about the Danzig crisis. Time, the element by which the novel is structured and which once held the future hopes of Copeland, Blount, and Mick, has become a destructive force. Death and disillusionment threaten on an international, historic scale as well as within the context of the novel. Now, in the early hours of a new day, Biff has an instant's flash of comprehension, when he sees in the ambivalence of his own nature the source of human suffering:

His heart turned and he leaned his back against the counter for support. For in a swift radiance of illumination he saw a glimpse of human struggle and of valor. Of the endless fluid passage of humanity through endless time. And of those who labor and of those who--one word--love. His soul expanded. But for a moment only. For in him he felt a warning, a shaft of terror. Between the two worlds he was suspended. He saw that he was looking at his own face in the counter glass before him. Sweat glistened on his temples and his face was contorted. One eye was opened wider than the other. The left eye delved narrowly into the past while the right gazed wide and affrighted into a future of blackness, error, and ruin. And he was suspended between radiance and darkness. Between bitter irony and faith.<sup>1</sup>

Biff sees the act of love--so elusive, so ephemeral--as man's only shield against a "future of blackness, error, and ruin," and is torn between a faith that love will prevail and the bitter irony of an almost certain knowledge that it cannot. Yet, he "composed himself soberly to wait the morning sun,"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 306.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 307.

closing the novel on an upbeat, if subdued, note.

In contrast to the other satellite characters, Biff has consistently turned his efforts more towards understanding others than in being understood. His mechanical position behind the counter, coupled with his innate objectivity, has nourished this bent "to store up a whole lot of details and then come upon something real."<sup>1</sup> In the course of the novel, his attitude has shifted from curiosity to compassion. Significantly, he keeps his cafe open all night, creating a way station of light and human contact on a dark street. With the death of Alice and the maturing of Mick, he has abandoned the idea of personal love. "Who would he be loving now? No one person. Anybody decent who came in out of the street to sit for an hour and have a drink. But no one person."<sup>2</sup>

Biff here comes close to achieving the Christian position of universal love which The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter holds to be the single valid truth in a chaotic world. Perhaps in the final chapter Biff functions as a mouthpiece for the author, who later wrote, "The passionate individual love--the old Triston-Isolde love, the Eros love--is inferior to the love of God, to fellowship, to the love of Agape--the Greek god of the feast, the God of brotherly love--and of man."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 304.

<sup>3</sup>McCullers, "The Flowering Dream," p. 164.

This is an ideal so obvious, so simple that the very difficulty of its realization constitutes a further irony. Yet those seeking redemption through companionship and brotherhood are in fact powerless to recognize those capable of offering it. Each of the characters is an incomplete complement of another, as the opening description of the two mutes neatly illustrates: the Greek's eyes are dreamy and half-closed; Singer's have a quick, intelligent expression. The former is sloppy and fat, the latter immaculate and thin. This same dovetailing exists on an ideological plane between Copeland and Blount. Yet their relationship is one of mistrust, and their single confrontation ends in an irrational exchange of insults. Copeland's suspicions of the white race are matched by his misgivings about the black; he cannot even sit in a room with his daughter, son and son-in-law without a quarrel growing out of the tension.

Similarly, Biff Brannon stands ready to extend to Mick the parental love she erroneously seeks in Singer, maneuvering for a glimpse of her as she does of the mute; Mick, mistaking Brannon's affection for its opposite, evades him as studiously as she dogs Singer. The quartet's assemblage in Singer's room results in a microcosmic society not of communion but mutual isolation.

The religious symbolic framework in which the novel rests is an appropriate outgrowth of the theme and plot,



but the symbols, forced to bear a heavy burden of multiple meanings, are occasionally too vague or obscure to support the structure. That Singer plays the role of "an unwilling Christ for men he is powerless to redeem"<sup>1</sup> seems obvious enough; but for the reader to make of him an absolute Christ figure or sacrificial hero--despite references to his "Jewish face," his serving of wine to those who seek him, and his fascination with moving chessmen on a board--destroys the irony of the allegory and suggests--within the context of Singer's dependence on Antonopoulos--either that one is in touch not with a monotheistic deity but a series of gods or that the ultimate Being is somehow deformed or abnormal. Neither of these conclusions contributes to the thematic impact of the novel, except to rationalize the lack of any universal faith among the characters and to explain the substitution of private commitments for obeisance to an omniscient deity. It seems more likely that Singer is a Christ figure only to the extent that he is worshipped by others and that he exists primarily as Singer the mortal, ironically more alienated and vulnerable than those who depend upon him.

The symbolism is even more confused by the unresolved obscurity of the "unknown thing" which Antonopoulos holds

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Spiller, and others, Literary History of the United States (New York: MacMillan Company, 1963), I, 1422.

above his head in the dream sequence. One can speculate that it is a religious token such as his brass crucifix, a narcissistic symbol such as mirror or a photograph, or a phallic object relating to the Greek's sexual deviations. However, because Carson McCullers has refrained from clarifying the matter, the reader can also conclude that the true apex of the cosmic pyramid is exactly the "unknown," the sum of its attraction and its power reduced to the fascination of the mysterious. This seems consistent with the attitudes of Singer's followers: the mystery which his silence engenders constitutes his basic attraction, and each lover--like each worshipper--must take the act of communion on faith, without any answering proof.

The political and sociological symbolism is also apparent, but less relevant than the religious. Carson McCullers has labeled her novel "an ironic parable of fascism."<sup>1</sup> The statement is limiting to the point of distortion, although the depression of the 1930's provides an appropriately gloomy backdrop, and the idea of political oppression abroad equates neatly with the picture of racial and economic oppression at home. Oliver Evans has formulated a cogent comparison by observing that:

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<sup>1</sup>Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft (eds.), Twentieth Century Authors (New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1942), p. 869.

. . . it is possible, if we think of Singer and Antonopoulos as leaders, blindly invested by others with attributes in which they are only too conspicuously (for those whom they fail to hypnotize) lacking, for us to see the terrifying meaning of the parable: in this absurdly grim game of follow-the-leader, the ultimate leader, the power behind the power, is a lunatic.<sup>1</sup>

At its most extensive level of meaning, however, The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter concerns itself not with religious or political allegory but with the poignant efforts of human beings to escape the imprisonment of the self by identifying with someone or something outside the cell of their individual beings. The pathos lies in the failure of each respective dream, as measured against the glory of what might have been. The good which man can envision is perhaps equalled only by the ineffectiveness with which his visions are translated into reality. The condition for fulfillment--that of spiritual communication--appears so delusively elementary that Christian fellowship, like love in the popular song, seems just around the corner. And yet given the innate narcissism of the human animal, it remains no more than a paradoxical promise, as unlikely to be granted as the oxymoronic proposal contained in a jingle authored by Mrs. McCullers:

When you're sweet as a pickle  
And clean as a pig,--  
I'll give you a nickel  
And dance you a jig.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Oliver Evans, "The Case of the Silent Singer," Georgia Review, XIX (Spring, 1965), 194.

<sup>2</sup>Carson McCullers, Sweet As a Pickle and Clean As a Pig (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1964), p. 3.

### CHAPTER III

#### REFLECTIONS IN A GOLDEN EYE

. . . nothing is  
But what is not.<sup>1</sup>

--Macbeth

Turning from The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter to Carson McCullers' next novel, Reflections in a Golden Eye, is much like slipping from haunting dream to stark nightmare, where the suspension of disbelief unveils a world in which--like a twentieth-century manifestation of Macbeth's dark paradox--truly nothing is but what is not, where the macabre and the lurid assume proportions of a reverse normalcy. The story is more tautly told than its predecessor, as though the sensational nature of the material had contracted the underlying plot lines; each of the characters, bounded by insistent imagery, exists as a compulsive negation of a particular life force, an embodiment--again--of what he is not and can never be.

The plot hangs on a murder which takes place on a Southern army post. "The participants were: two officers, a soldier, two women, a Filipino, and a horse."<sup>2</sup> From the

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<sup>1</sup>William Shakespeare, "Macbeth," The Complete Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1942), p. 1187. (Act I, scene iii, lines 141-142).

<sup>2</sup>Carson McCullers, Reflections in a Golden Eye (New York: Bantam, 1958), p. 2.

exactness of this early statement, as precise and inflexible as the army post described in the paragraph which precedes it, the story's progression is from order to disorder.

The novel takes its shape from the interdependence of the characters, whose relationship to each other forms a continuum of human impulses, precariously balanced between body and mind at the outset but teetering more and more violently as events develop.<sup>1</sup> At one end of this seesaw is Captain Weldon Penderton, an army officer of considerable academic knowledge but of scant masculine intuition; his wife, Leonora, is hearty, sensual, and "a little feeble-minded,"<sup>2</sup> a female opposite of himself.

His male antithesis, Major Morris Langdon--bluff, lusty, jovial--is both his neighbor and his wife's lover. Langdon ironically is married to a woman whose brooding sensitivity and asceticism distinctly locates her on Penderton's side of the scale, but Alison Langdon and the Captain mutually loathe each other, Alison finding consolation in the companionship of her mercurial Filipino houseboy, Anacleto, and

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<sup>1</sup>Other critics have compared the relationships of the characters to opposing triangles or a rhombus. See Hugo McPherson, "Carson McCullers: Lonely Huntress," Tamarack Review, XI (Spring, 1959), 34, and Simeon Mozart Smith, Jr., Carson McCullers: A Critical Introduction (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1964), p. 36.

<sup>2</sup>McCullers, Reflection in a Golden Eye, p. 17.

Penderton focusing his emotions on Private Ellgee Williams, a primitive type who grooms Leonora's horse. Williams is in turn enamoured of Leonora and sneaks into the Penderton household at night to watch her sleep. When Penderton discovers him crouched at his wife's bedside, he shoots and fatally wounds Williams.

The paradox central to the novel is the ironic duality of human nature, the alienation of spirit from flesh, of imagination from the senses. These separate elements of human nature, ideally complementary and supportive, are instead antagonistic and destructive, as though heart and brain blindly destroyed the parent body in a bitter struggle for dominance. The characters, setting and plot cohere to create an enveloping metaphor of this dichotomy. The image of the army post, surrounded and even menaced by the untamed countryside, is one of regimentation and conformity--dull, monotonous, rigid. Within the boundaries of the post and yet distinct from it, the horse Firebird exists as an embodiment of the natural, instinctual side of human nature. Man, caught between these two polarities, must somehow seek to reconcile them.

Unlike the characters of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, each of whom straddled certain oppositions within himself, the personages of Reflections exist more as symbolic

distillations of the above polar extremes, unable, therefore, to achieve the synthesis that would make them whole. Significantly, the only one to attempt to do so is Penderton, whose basic nature is more ambivalent and complex than the others:

He stood in a somewhat curious relation to the three fundamentals of existence--life itself, sex, and death. Sexually the Captain obtained within himself a delicate balance between the male and female elements, with the susceptibilities of both the sexes and the active powers of neither. . . . He had a sad penchant for becoming enamoured of his wife's lovers.

As to his relations with the other two fundamentals, his position was simple enough. In his balance between the two great instincts, toward life and toward death, the scale was heavily weighted to one side--to death. Because of this the Captain was a coward.<sup>1</sup>

His absorption in academic abstraction is reminiscent of the cold didacticism of Dr. Copeland. A large proportion of Penderton's evenings is spent alone in his study, perusing graphs, charts, and maps. The study, a converted sun-porch, is an outward extension of Penderton's warped psyche, for the sun image in the novel is associated with the natural, instinctual man (Williams); the remodeled study, complete with the inevitable slide rule representative of the technical sciences, constitutes both a rejection of and a refuge from that force. Body is sublimated to mind. In much the same way, Penderton has forced the instinctive principle into a mechanical mold when he squeezes the kitten into the freezing mailbox.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 10-11.

Yet the Captain is aware of the disequilibrium of his nature and becomes obsessed, in a way which he fails to understand, with that which dimly represents to him a rebalancing of the scales in favor of life and masculinity. His name is indicative of the pending, undecided essence of his makeup, and like Biff Brannon, he hangs "suspended" between two worlds.<sup>1</sup> This spiritual rupture is far more incapacitating than the hernia from which he suffers and is reflected in the repeated imagery of the Captain as a doll with "glassy" eyes, an imitation man:

Out in the forest there, the Captain looked like a broken  
doll that had been thrown away.<sup>2</sup> . . . . .

For once he did not see himself as others saw him; there  
came to him a distorted doll-like image, mean of countenance  
and grotesque in form.<sup>3</sup>

Lacking a firm, inner sense of identity, Penderton depends upon such externals as rank and dress to bolster his individuality: "The Captain always wore uniform when away from the post, but on all social occasions among other officers he affected mufti and was a great swell."<sup>4</sup>

The insecurity of his world prompts him to violent acts as a way of affirming his own existence. The pivotal scene in

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<sup>1</sup>Penderton was originally named Singleton, but the name was changed because, by coincidence, there was an army general by that name. Smith, op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>2</sup>McCullers, Reflections, p. 78.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 10.



which Penderton attempts to ride Firebird represents an attempt to establish contact with that which he both desires and fears, the vitality of instinctive sexuality. When the stallion runs away with him, Penderton is at first terror-stricken, but confronting death at this moment, he ironically discovers the juices of life. As the horse slows to an exhausted trot, his elation subsides, and venting the frustrations of a lifetime, Penderton turns violently upon Firebird, the source of his momentary joy.

With this act, Penderton has rejected the instinctive power of sex, but his disquietude seeks a central focus:

There are times when a man's greatest need is to have someone to love, some focal point for his diffused emotions. Also there are times when the irritations, disappointments, and fears of life, restless as spermatozoids, must be released in hate.<sup>1</sup>

From this point on, the Captain becomes obsessed with Private Williams, erroneously reading into the latter's character the courage and vitality he finds lacking in his own. The sado-masochistic motif of military life has been explored previously by other writers, notably Lawrence ("The Prussian Officer") and Melville ("Billy Budd"). In each case, an older, compulsive officer is attracted to a primitive, uncorrupted youth and sublimates his homosexual passion in a driving hatred. In a like manner, Penderton, imagining

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 52-53.

himself as an enlisted man secure in the barracks a camaraderie, attempts to establish a contact with the Private which would give substance to his daydreams. Failing to do so, he projects in a series of sadistic fantasies and masochistic overtures a demand to be recognized by Williams, hoping that a relationship between the two of them will help him recapture the controlled fury of the ride.

Williams, however, is a delusory symbol to Penderton as was Antonopoulos to Singer. Although the trappings of military life--which have even provided Williams with a proper name--invest him with the appearance of being caught up in life, he too is entangled in his private fantasies and unable to break through to another human. The virile, "natural" man of Penderton's imaginings is in fact a grotesquely withdrawn voyeur, whose early all-male upbringing--akin to the Captain's all-female household of childhood years--has resulted to an equal degree in sexual abnormalities.

Williams is frequently identified with the imagery of a wild animal--innocent, watchful, agile, solitary. Early in the novel, he exposes the Captain to the animalistic principle which he represents by trimming the lower branches off of Penderton's oak tree, thus destroying "the background shutting off the rest of the woods."<sup>1</sup> Because Penderton cannot cope with the instinctive forces lurking in nature, "standing alone

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

in the woods he was a small man."<sup>1</sup>

Williams, ironically, succeeds in stirring up the stormy emotions in Penderton which Leonora's blatant faithlessness has failed to arouse; the "cynical good grace"<sup>2</sup> with which the Captain carries his cuckoldry would be more properly reserved for the inadvertent mishaps (such as the spilled coffee and hewn tree limbs) that Williams inflicts upon him. The inverted emotional values within this fictional world underscore its warped and warping distortions.

Immune to the tensions which vibrate around her, Leonora provides a perfect foil to the character of her husband. Again, her name is a characternym, suggestive of both her feline, animal qualities and her prowess as a social and sexual lioness. Her opposition to Penderton is so complete that the mockery of their marriage is inexplicable. The author makes no attempt to account for it; the reader can only accept as fact the questionable myth that opposites attract. But Leonora's stupidity, her animal enjoyment of sex, hearty appetite (often a sign of moral depravity in McCullers) and mindless slumber constitute such a direct antithesis to Penderton's sensitive rigidity, insomnia, and sexual ambivalence that the marriage relationship is totally perverted. Leonora refers to Penderton as "son"; he attempts

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

to discipline her with the shrill futility of an ineffectual mother. Although Leonora has the appearance of "a woman who has had several well-born babies and who hopefully expects another in about eight months,"<sup>1</sup> the Penderton marriage, like the Penderton mind, is sterile. Leonora's is a barren fecundity.

Her relationship with Major Morris Langdon, although adulterous, is the only one in the novel that approaches anything like normality. It seems possible to conclude that Carson McCullers is saying that physical passion succeeds best where the spiritual potential is weakest, for Langdon--as comfortable as the Morris chair at which his name hints--is only slightly more sentient than Leonora and is endowed with a similar appreciation of good food, fine liquor, and pleasurable sex. Ironically, when Alison's death leaves him free to enjoy his sensual pastimes, he retreats instead into a stunned and sentimental period of mourning, even bemoaning the absence of Anacleto, whose presence had previously been a constant irritant. His empty but congenial nature reflects itself in his final ambition "to be a good animal and to serve my country. A healthy body and patriotism."<sup>2</sup>

Langdon's grief seems ironically proportionate to the lack of ready understanding he afforded his wife while she

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 129.

was alive. Yet Alison, although the victim of a series of misfortunes, is a less sympathetic character than circumstances might warrant. Penderton's reaction to her as a "big-nosed female Job"<sup>1</sup> is peculiarly apt; Alison's incessant brooding on the wrongdoings of her husband, the death of her baby, and her own illness is repellent. This psychological self-torture finds its physical expression when she "cut[s] off the tender nipples of her breasts with the garden shears."<sup>2</sup> The horror of this act is a measure of Alison's derangement; nevertheless, she is the only character to perceive that the army post world is hideously awry:

Everyone she had known in the past five years was somehow wrong--that is, everyone except Weincheck and of course Anacleto and little Catherine. Morris Langdon in his blunt way was as stupid and heartless as a man could be. Leonora was nothing but an animal. And thieving Weldon Penderton was at bottom hopelessly corrupt. What a gang! Even she herself she loathed.<sup>3</sup>

She is also alone in sensing that an alien force (personified by Williams) lurks within the Captain's house. When her attempts to communicate this fail, she is driven into that isolation which the others promptly label as "insanity."

The fate of her baby--the offspring of her union with the materialistic and sensual Langdon--has persuaded her that true marriage between the separate worlds of body and mind can

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 87.

result only in pain, deformity, and death. She therefore retreats into a purely spiritual, aesthetically-oriented world of the imagination, sparsely populated by the kindly but unsuccessful Lieutenant Weincheck and the houseboy Anacleto.

The relationship between Alison and Weincheck, one of solicitation and mutual interests, seemingly approaches the state of fraternal understanding exemplified as the ideal in The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter. However, its positive values are distorted by the inherent absurdities exaggerated in Anacleto, who mirrors the extremities of the spiritual world as Williams does the animalistic. The note of wry humor he injects into the otherwise unrelieved pessimism is weakened by his almost unbearable precocity and affectation. "It was common knowledge that he thought the Lord had blundered grossly in the making of everyone except himself and Madame Alison-- the sole exceptions to this were people behind the footlights, midgets, great artists, and such-like fabulous folk."<sup>1</sup> He apes Alison so completely (to the point of desiring a jacket to match the fabric of her clothing) that their voices are indistinguishable one from the other; her interests are his only interests, and he has even suffered the vicarious pangs of labor and childbirth. The pretentiousness of his linguistic

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

endeavors, his imitative ballet stances, and his incomprehensible pseudo-philosophic sophisms all testify (despite his genuine devotion to Alison) to the bizarreness of a purely aesthetic world without the steadying weight of the coarser side of human nature.

The imbalance of human nature, then, sentences each character to an irrevocable checkmate. Souls are warped without bodies, bodies are crippled without souls. Yet, although unable to function alone, neither Penderton, Alison, and Anacleto on the one hand, nor Leonora, Langdon and Williams on the other succeed in appropriating from the opposing group what is lacking in their own personality. By the end of the novel, Penderton has killed the instinctive force symbolized by Williams, and Langdon has routed the imaginative force represented by Anacleto.

Penderton's final act of violence caps the ironic path of events which the plot has followed. He has murdered the man he loves in defense of the honor of the woman he does not love--and whose honor, furthermore, is a matter of vast indifference to him. The center of his emotional life destroyed, the Captain "resembled a broken and dissipated monk."<sup>1</sup> Only the shell of his tortured asceticism remains.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

The controlling image of the novel is taken from Anacleto's vision of a "peacock of a sort of ghastly green. With one immense golden eye. And in it these reflections of something tiny and . . . grotesque."<sup>1</sup> In Indian, Egyptian and Roman mythology, a peacock is a bird of ill omen. But the regimented beings of the army camp are oblivious to the steady gaze of the evil bird. Each, like the peacock, contains within himself grotesque patterns which he reflects without comprehension. Totally self-absorbed, the characters fail to recognize either the underlying corruption of their world or the depravity which erupts when the capacity to love is fatally twisted.

The passive Williams is the "symbolic counterpart of the bird whose golden eye reflects but does not see, save with the terror and despair inherent in its mirror images."<sup>2</sup> His irrational behavior mirrors the actions of the other characters, all of whom are driven by forces they cannot comprehend and whose actions are therefore more a form of compulsive reaction than free will. Like Williams, who "did not actually know that he was going to buy a cow until he counted out his

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>2</sup>John B. Vickery, "Carson McCullers: A Map of Love," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, I (Winter, 1950), 21.



money and put his hand on the halter,"<sup>1</sup> each character at some point in the story finds himself engaged in an action which he has not consciously planned or willed.

Within the Private's gold-brown eyes is a "deep reflection"<sup>2</sup> of Leonora's nude body, but the image is distorted by his unnatural ignorance of women. This distortion, in turn, results in the grotesque voyeurism which permeates the lives of the other characters and seals their eventual doom. His is an extreme example of the inwardness of love, where the lover is totally isolated (although in physical proximity) from the object of his love.

Other images of reflection occur throughout the novel, supplementing the fragmented crazy-house atmosphere of a world lacking a moral dimension. The Captain sees in Firebird's eyes "a liquid image of his own frightened face;"<sup>3</sup> his eyes mirror the kaleidoscopic impressions of natural phenomena during his wild ride. Leonora, who "always found it a little difficult to picture a situation that did not actually take place in the room with her,"<sup>4</sup> is merely an unthinking reflection of her environment from which she cannot, any more than a mirror, create something original.

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<sup>1</sup>McCullers, Reflections, p. 30.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 107.

Anacleto and Alison reflect each other completely. Yet, ironically, none of the characters is reflective in a genuinely meditative sense.

The book is divided into four sections. The first two sections begin with Williams; the third opens with Alison's hazy impression of Williams leaving the Penderton house, and the fourth with the Captain's obsessive need to establish contact with Williams. Each part concludes by circling back to the Private and his eerie nighttime vigils. Structurally, it is as if one chapter reflects the next with increasing force and violence; the major incidents are magnified repetitions of preceding events. Leonora's quiet dinner party in part one is duplicated in part three as an elaborate festivity for the "whole shebang" of resident officers and their wives. The sedate ride by Leonora, Landon, and Penderton in part two is a faint harbinger of the wild gallop through untamed countryside by Penderton in part three. Alison's insomniac terrors of part three are intensified in part four when she discovers Williams in Leonora's bedroom. The death motif--only peripheral to the central action in the first three parts--reaches full culmination in part four with the death of Alison and the murder of Williams.

The card game in part two, a microcosmic mirror of the army post domain which in turn exists as a microcosm of

the world at large, skillfully reflects the Penderton-Langdon tangle of relationships. Leonora and Langdon play black-jack with Firebird (symbol of instinctive sex) as the stakes. Langdon keeps track of the score and informs Penderton that his wife is cheating, whereupon the Captain replies that a woman cannot be trusted. Alison is the first to leave, remonstrating that she does not wish to break up the party. Prophetically, after her death, the remaining trio does not "break up"; Langdon becomes "like a third member of the [Penderton] family."<sup>1</sup>

The primary golden eye, of course, is that of the author, dispassionately reflecting in her controlled prose the lurid characters and actions without comment. The images then are reflected back to the reader who must decipher them for himself. However, the kernel of significance at the core of the novel is so overlaid by obscurities that no distinct sprouts of meaning can take root. The "why" of the action must be deduced from the actions themselves, which are reflections in an eye that mirrors but does not interpret. The novel suffers from a lack of any norm or standard to throw the whole into relief. The very skill of the symbolism has defeated itself in the setting up of such pure and sharply

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 122.

defined polarities. There is no thrust of character against the odds, because the characters are meant to exemplify the odds. "The price of such perfection in having everything come out exact and even is that you have to play with a special deck of cards, deliberately leaving the hearts out of it."<sup>1</sup>

Late in the story, the Captain asks if "any fulfillment obtained at the expense of normalcy is wrong, and should not be allowed to bring happiness. In short, " [is it] better, because it is morally honorable, for the square peg to keep scraping about the round hole rather than to discover and use the unorthodox square that would fit it?"<sup>2</sup> Carson McCullers has given no certain answer. She has depicted a world in which the ranks of major, captain, lieutenant and private are assigned irrespective of personal, inner worth, implying a parallel to society's captious indexing of the individual without regard to his essential humanity. The impossibility of any kind of fulfillment--normal or abnormal--would seem the only certainty in such an unlovely and loveless world.

As Mark Schorer has pointed out, the novel is an inversion of Carson McCullers' basic theme of love and loneliness,

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<sup>1</sup>Otis Ferguson, New Republic, CIV (March 3, 1941), 317.

<sup>2</sup>McCullers, Reflections, p.125.

centering as it does on people whose self-engrossment, malice, contempt, and stupidity place them outside the possibility of feeling either love or loneliness. "There is no one to be redeemed, no love to deepen the loneliness."<sup>1</sup> Substituting lust for affection, hate for love, self-pity for compassion, and cunning for intelligence, they remain as unsympathetic a cast as any author ever assembled. One critic wryly observed, with reference to the solid body of aberrated characters, that not even the horse is normal.<sup>2</sup>

Again, as in The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter, the central action is laced with sensationalism, ranging from murder, infant death, and self-torture to homosexuality, kleptomania, voyeurism, and adultery. But the violent or deviant episodes differ from those of the earlier novel; in Reflections, they most often occur as a desperate, last-ditch attempt at communication in a world where language is "a series of mirrors for interior monologues,"<sup>3</sup> as meaningless as Major Langdon's mock attempt at French: "Vooley voo rooney mooney moo!"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Mark Schorer, "McCullers and Capote: Basic Patterns," The Creative Present, eds. N. Balakian and C. Simmons (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1963), p. 90.

<sup>2</sup>Oliver Evans, "The Theme of Spiritual Isolation in Carson McCullers," South: Modern Southern Literature in Its Cultural Setting, eds. Louis D. Rubin and R. D. Jacobs (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1961), p. 337.

<sup>3</sup>Vickery, op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>4</sup>McCullers, Reflections, p. 42.

Tennessee Williams has justified the decidedly gothic cast of the novel with the explanation that "a book is short and a man's life is long. . . . The awfulness has to be compressed"<sup>1</sup> if the artist is to communicate the dreadful-ness of modern existence. Perhaps this very compression has led the frequent charge of "morbidity" which the novel attracted, for although The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter contained as much, if not more, perversion and grotesquerie, it is longer and more complex; the deviations do not loom so large in proportion. In addition, because the characters of Reflec-tions suffer from psychological rather than physical abnor-malities, they are less readily grasped as symbols.

Without the leavening influence of the author's con-trolling irony, the total effect of the novel would be purely melodramatic. But the paradoxical situations combine with Carson McCullers' severe objectivity to qualify the whole. The predominant mirror image, rendering a world of feigned perspective and false dimension, reverses the values and bearings of such a world. Right and left are transposed in a literal manner, right and wrong in a poetic, figurative sense. It is as if, to borrow again from Tennessee Williams, the everyday world "is largely something done with mirrors, and the mirrors are the millions of eyes that look at each

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<sup>1</sup>Tennessee Williams, "Introduction," Reflections in a Golden Eye, p. xiii.

other and things no more penetratingly than the physical senses allow."<sup>1</sup> This is the wasteland of Carson McCullers' second novel--eyes that do not perceive, ears that do not heed. The utter meaninglessness of life is played out again and again, in lives that run parallel but never touch. But because the world it encompasses is devoid of meaning, it does not follow that the novel itself is totally incomprehensible. Ihab Hassan expressed a similar viewpoint when he wrote, "It [Reflections] is arrested on the level of incongruousness its title proclaims. But the absurdity it reflects goes far to show how much our desires outstrip the particular reality of our day--and how much we pay."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. xi.

<sup>2</sup>Hassan, Radical Innocence, p. 218.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING

Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!  
--Samuel Beckett<sup>1</sup>

Carson McCullers' third novel, The Member of the Wedding, is set in that twilight period of early adolescence, when the world itself seems to hang suspended between the fading glow of late childhood and the rapt dawn of impending maturity. It is a time of hushed expectancy, when all things are possible and nothing certain, when each man's private Godot loiters in the wings, ever a promise, never a presence.

"Nothing ever happened to me," wails Frankie Addams,<sup>2</sup> the novel's twelve-year-old heroine, whose life is suddenly reduced to a tedious interim of undefined suspense. Like Mick Kelly, she finds herself teetering between the conflicting worlds of childhood and adulthood, and the contradictions and ambiguities growing out of her uncertain balance define the basic area of the novel in which the major ironies develop.

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<sup>1</sup>Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot (New York: Grove Press, 1954), p. 28.

<sup>2</sup>Carson McCullers, The Member of the Wedding (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1958), p. 108.



In Heart, this area was bounded by the relationship of the characters to each other and resulted in a profound comment on the nature of man's religiosity. In Reflections, the essential one-sidedness of the characters and the lack of any meaningful relationship between them established the ironic effect, which was less profound and more bitter than in the earlier novel. In each case there was the implication that a stultifying lack of humanity on the part of all the characters sentenced them to their state of spiritual isolation, which, although a common condition of life, was not necessarily an irrevocable one.

However, in The Member of the Wedding, the ironies of Frankie's situation are inherent in her time of life. It is not her lack of humanity but rather a particular stage of humanity (through which all must pass) that shapes her character and serves as a foundation for the central paradox which sustains the novel. It is the old contradiction inherent in being able to acquire a genuine sense of self only by identifying with something outside the self. In Frankie's case, she suffers from the loneliness of being "an unjoined person who hung around in doorways,"<sup>1</sup> always on the threshold but never admitted to the magic of the inner circle. Then, on the eve of her brother's marriage, she seizes upon the idea of becoming a "member of the wedding" and of forever living with the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 1.

couple. She sees this plan as a fulfillment of her adventurous daydreams and, even more significantly, as a guarantee of membership in the world. "We will have thousands of friends, thousands and thousands and thousands of friends. We will belong to so many clubs that we can't even keep track of all of them. We will be members of the whole world."<sup>1</sup> As long as Frankie thinks of herself as an "I" person, she lacks a firm sense of identity. With the discovery of "the we of me, . . . at last she knew just who she was and understood where she was going."<sup>2</sup>

The time of the novel is summer, when the three-month intermission between school terms has thrown Frankie back upon her own uncertain resources, which seem suddenly a size too large for childhood and a size too small for adulthood. Her suffocating sense of isolation is closely related to the mood captured in an autobiographical incident recalled by Mrs. McCullers:

When I was a child of about four, I was walking with my nurse past a convent. For once, the convent doors were open. And I saw the children eating ice-cream cones, playing on iron swings, and I watched, fascinated. I wanted to go in, but my nurse said no, I was not Catholic. The next day, the gate was shut. But, year by year, I thought of what was going on, of this wonderful party, where I was shut out. I wanted to climb the wall, but I was too little. I beat on the wall once, and I knew all the time that there was a marvelous party going on, but I couldn't get in.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>3</sup>Carson McCullers, The Flowering Dream, p. 162.

The inaccessible party for which Frankie yearns is simply her adolescent vision of life--a dream world whose outlines are softened by a blanket of mysterious snow, where each individual is joined to another by irrevocable bonds of love and fellowship. It is a world viewed through the eye of one who is deeply lonely.

There is no personified antagonist in the novel; the characters "are beating their wings . . . against something which isn't there, or is within themselves."<sup>1</sup> The conflicts are inward, with little external action to supplement what is essentially a perceptive character study of the adolescent girl. This deliberate limitation brings to mind John Galsworthy's contention that a human being is the best plot there is. "A bad plot is simply a row of stakes with a character impaled on each--characters who would have liked to live but came to untimely grief."<sup>2</sup>

The emphasis is on the interior life of the protagonist; most of the action takes place in her heart and mind. Essentially a "monologue furnished with figures,"<sup>3</sup> the narrative is couched in Frankie's language, creating a sense of

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Littell, Yale Review, XXX (Autumn, 1940), viii.

<sup>2</sup>As quoted by John Mason Brown, Saturday Review, XXXIII (January 28, 1950), 27.

<sup>3</sup>George Dangerfield, Saturday Review, XXIX (March 30, 1946), 15.

identification with her. And yet there remains a quizzical awareness of the adult author through whose mind and emotions the recollections of childhood have been sifted. Frankie's daydream of "meeting the soldiers who had her blood, and their saying that they owed their life to her"<sup>1</sup> has the ring of authenticity; it also evokes a disparaging smile. This double viewpoint--empathy counterpointed by implied objectivity--rescues the novel from an excess of sentimentality and underscores the gently ironic tone.

Providing a foil to Frankie's impossible dream of joining the wedding are Berenice Sadie Brown, the Addams' Negro cook, and John Henry West, Frankie's six-year-old cousin. Together with Frankie, they form a community of the alienated, who find in the ugly kitchen both a refuge and a prison, a prison whose only bars are rays of sunlight, but whose conditions of tedium, uncertainty and isolation Frankie imagines as harsher than any court-imposed penalty: "It was better to be in a jail where you could bang the wall than in a jail you could not see."<sup>2</sup>

John Henry and Berenice represent the extremes of innocence and experience between whose borders Frankie attempts to find passage, and her practice of singing in the middle

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<sup>1</sup>McCullers, The Member of the Wedding, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 148.

space between John Henry's soprano and Berenice's contralto is appropriate to and symbolic of their relationship. Each of these three main characters embodies a divergent aspect of the central paradox, with the total design emerging from the juxtaposition of one character to another. The functional symbolism of the trio is balanced by their very real humanity, with a convincingly realistic life apart from their allegorical value. The Member of the Wedding is perhaps Mrs. McCullers' most successful fusion of the realistic and allegorical modes.

John Henry West, as a personification of childish innocence, represents that sense of easy identification with the world which is the product of a vision simplified by inexperience. Although forever asking questions, he has as yet asked none of life. The limitations of his perspective are manifested in his grotesque drawings which disfigure the kitchen walls. Although small for his age, his earnestness touches him with an adult mien which he wears like a costume. Frankie sees him as "a tiny watchmaker,"<sup>1</sup> a miniature of her father, but his outlook, shielded by the fantasy world of childhood, is maddeningly immature.

"Why, I'm not a bit lonesome," he tells Frankie, too guileless to recognize that the world is "silent and crazy and sad."<sup>2</sup> It is as though his gold-rimmed spectacles are

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

capable of transforming what is mundane, ugly, and absurd into the beautiful and the ideal. Nothing is distasteful to his young eyes. He is entranced with the Pin Head at the Freak House, seeing not the "shrunken head no larger than an orange,"<sup>1</sup> but "the cutest little girl"<sup>2</sup> he ever encountered. He mistakes moths for butterflies, and in a line that was added by Mrs. McCullers to her dramatization of the novel, he plaintively states his preference for Berenice's blue glass eye over her natural dark one.

Frankie correctly perceives that John Henry's mind is "like the pictures he drew with crayons on tablet paper,"<sup>3</sup> and she inevitably finds it "impossible to understand his point of view."<sup>4</sup> To her exasperation, John Henry, with an Alice-in-Wonderland logic, refuses to abide by the rules of the card game and ignores the criteria of artistic portraiture--refutes, in short, the dictates of the adult world.

"He's a child! It is hopeless! Hopeless!" Frankie cries, ironically more prophetic than she knows, for his childhood syndrome is incurable. Stricken with meningitis, he dies before he can mature to another stage. Like the little biscuit man he had fashioned, he too is misshapen by

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 132.

the heat of experience, "his eyeballs . . . walled up in a corner stuck and blind . . . his head drawn back in a buckled way."<sup>1</sup>

In opposition to John Henry's complacent innocence, Berenice manifests the tempered wisdom of experience. Unlike the naive child, she is keenly aware of the isolation native to the human condition and of the futility of attempting to escape it:

We all of us somehow caught. We born this way or that way and we don't know why. But we caught anyhow. . . . And maybe we wants to widen and bust free. But no matter what we do we still caught. Me is me and you is you and he is he. We each one of us somehow caught all by ourself.<sup>2</sup>

In the security of her first marriage to Ludie Freeman, Berenice had discovered the value of love as a counteractant to loneliness. "When I was with Ludie, I didn't feel so caught."<sup>3</sup> After Ludie's death, however, despite repeated attempts to duplicate the relationship, she fails to recapture the old happiness:

I loved Ludie and he was the first man I loved. Therefore, I had to go and copy myself forever afterward. What I did was marry off little pieces of Ludie whenever I come across them. It was just my misfortune they all turned out to be the wrong pieces. My intention was to repeat me and Ludie.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 101.

The evanescence of love is exemplified in Berenice's surname, which remains constant in spite of her four marriages. As she explains to Frankie, a name signifies the sum total of a person, "because things accumulate around your name."<sup>1</sup> Each individual is caught, then, in his own identity of which his name is an unalterable label. Berenice's family name signifies an additional dimension of isolation, that imposed by race. Briefly a Freeman by the grace of love, she has reverted to the alienated state which a racist society imposes. While she does not specifically aspire to be white, her blue eye is a comment on the color line and the arbitrary divisions that separate people from each other.

If Berenice's search for love has not resulted in happiness, it has at least yielded a large measure of wisdom. Her spiritual vision is in no way impaired by her physical defect, and she clearly comprehends the incomprehensible ways of love:

I have heard of many a queer thing. I have knew mens to fall in love with girls so ugly that you wonder if their eyes is straight. I have seen some of the most peculiar weddings anybody could conjecture. . . . I have knew womens to love veritable Satans and thank Jesus when they put their split hooves over the threshold. I have knew boys to take it into their heads to fall in love with other boys.<sup>2</sup>

Thus Frankie's motives, while irrational, are transparent to Berenice: "I can see right through them two gray eyes of yours like they was glass."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 75-76.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 102.



Although Berenice can also see that Frankie's plans will end only in disaster, she fails to communicate this in any meaningful way. Berenice is committed to the adult world and speaks with the voice of experience; to the uninitiated Frankie, the words are as incomprehensible as a foreign tongue.

Yet Berenice has her blind spot, too, in that she considers herself a great beauty. Frankie is able to recognize the disparity between Berenice's self-image and "the dark face with the wild blue eye, the eleven greased plaits that fitted her head like a skull-cap, the wide flat nose that quivered as she spoke."<sup>1</sup> Ironically, although Berenice and Frankie are each trapped within themselves, they have less understanding of their own identities than of each other. However, Berenice's self-esteem makes possible her patient endurance, for one cannot accept life without first accepting and liking oneself.

Contrapuntal to Berenice's resigned loneliness is Frankie's frenzied sense of isolation. Fascinated by the secrets of the adult world, yet clinging to the reassuring familiarities of childhood, excluded from both children's games and adolescent parties, she is a part of both worlds but a member of neither. Her nickname, like Mick's, indicates

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

her sexual indetermination, and her surname connotes her primordial passage from innocence to knowledge. Her ambivalent attitude about crossing this particular threshold is symbolized in a dream she has: "I dreamed there was a door. I was just looking at it and while I watched, it began slowly to open. And it made me feel funny and I woke up."<sup>1</sup>

Her initiation is multifarious, consisting specifically of a dawning awareness of human sexuality, and, more generally, of a growing understanding of human personality as it is shaped by the enigmas of love and death. Frankie's neophyte standing is effectively paralleled by the snatches of fragmented music which sound in the distance, first "a grieving August song that did not end,"<sup>2</sup> and later, a blues tune played on a horn that is "left broken, unfinished."<sup>3</sup> The similarities between the music and the emotionally and physically incomplete girl are obvious.

Her sexual innocence misleads her into believing that she can actually become a member of the wedding; she resists Berenice's argument that on a honeymoon, two are company and three a crowd just as she rejects a sexually oriented discussion by her peers as "nasty lies about married people."<sup>4</sup> She has sternly repressed the memory of her furtive episode

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

with Barney McKean and dismisses the soldier's assault as "crazy"; yet she cannot hide forever from the revelation that is an inevitable part of growing up:

. . . she recalled the silence in the hotel room; and all at once a fit in a front room, the silence, the nasty talk behind the garage--these separate recollections fell together in the darkness of her mind, as shafting searchlights meet in the night sky upon an aeroplane, so that in a flash there came in her an understanding.<sup>1</sup>

Partially because Frankie's conception of love is so thoroughly asexual, she has become enamored not with another human being, but with a particular instance of attraction between two people which she generalizes into a kind of universal love. Stubbornly and unrealistically, she seeks to include herself in the very idea of inclusion, while ironically rebelling against those to whose sphere she honestly belongs. Indeed, on the last pages of the book, when the strange little trio of the cook, the six-year-old boy and the adolescent girl has irrevocably dissolved, the pattern of their relationship seems in retrospect as illusive and perfect as the impossible wedding of three.

As though taking its cue from Berenice's admonition that two are company and three a crowd, the material of the novel is arranged in threefold groupings, echoing Frankie's sensation that the world is composed of crowds, "and you don't know what joins them up."<sup>2</sup> The action occurs over

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

three days, which correspond to the three separate parts of the work. The middle section in turn is divided into three chapters, each respectively covering the morning, afternoon and evening of the middle day. There are three main characters, representing three stages of life; in addition, Frankie assumes three different identities, one for each day.

Her changing identities conform rather closely to "the way her world seemed layered in three different parts, all the twelve years of the old Frankie, the present day itself, and the future ahead. . . ."<sup>1</sup> With each new shift in her name and character, Frankie, chameleonic fashion, assumes the dominant coloration of the world as she currently sees it. As Frankie the tombody, she is bored, defiant, bewildered and haunted by a world that is "huge and cracked and loose and turning a thousand miles an hour."<sup>2</sup> As the exotic F. Jasmine, "she did not see the world as loose and cracked and turning a thousand miles an hour, so that the spinning views of war and distant lands made her mind dizzy. The world had never been so close to her."<sup>3</sup> All eagerness and self-importance, she feels connected to everything and everyone she sees. The post-wedding Frances of part three, at last forced to acknowledge the essential separateness that marks

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 66.

the human condition, has settled into a more realistic identity, a little sadder and a little wiser:

The world was now so far away that Frances could no longer think of it. She did not see the earth as in the old days. . . ; the earth was enormous and still and flat. Between herself and all the places there was a space like an enormous canyon she could not hope to bridge or cross. The plans for the movies or the Marines were only child plans that would never work.  
 . . .<sup>1</sup>

Contrasting to the consistent triform pattern are scattered images of duality: Berenice's expression is "two-sighted";<sup>2</sup> Frankie feels "double-minded"<sup>3</sup> about meeting the soldier for a date; John Henry is a "two-faced, . . . double-faced Judas"<sup>4</sup> for not liking her wedding dress; and Frankie wishes that "her expression [were] split into two parts, so that one eye stared at Berenice in an accusing way, and the other eye thanked her with a grateful look."<sup>5</sup> The perfidious doubleness conveyed here ironically opposes the natural unity implicit in Berenice's notion of two as "company": "Remember Noah and the ark? . . . Two by two. He admitted them creatures two by two."<sup>6</sup>

What Berenice does not realize, as her succession of marriage indicates, is that twofoldness is as fallible and illogical a panacea for spiritual isolation as Frankie's

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

dream of the wedding of three. If three is a crowd, two contains the threat of treacherous division. Thus her conclusion that Frankie needs "a nice little white boy beau,"<sup>1</sup> while sensible enough on the surface, is perhaps no more reasonable than Frankie's desire to become a member of the wedding.

Significantly, Frankie's sadness had begun in April, that classically cruel month which mixes hope with despair, death with rebirth. "April that year came sudden and still, and the green of the trees was a wild, bright green. The pale wisterias bloomed all over town, and silently the blossoms shattered. There was something about the green trees and flowers of April that made Frankie sad."<sup>2</sup>

What Frankie is dimly experiencing without realizing it is the fact of mortality, and her thoughts repeatedly circle back to the dead people she has known. Death seems to symbolize for her a state of ultimate isolation, where the failure of verbal communication constitutes the final horror. She remembers of Uncle Charles that "his voice failed, and when he tried to talk, it was as though his throat had filled with glue, and they could not understand the words."<sup>3</sup> Lon Baker's "cut throat opened like a crazy shivering mouth that spoke ghost words into the April sun."<sup>4</sup> And John Henry, in his final hours, "had lost the strength to scream."<sup>5</sup> Frankie's

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 152.

assumption, then, of a new identity as F. Jasmine appears as a sort of deliberate rebirth, an attempt to escape the isolation which she equates with death.

Even the passage of time bewilders and threatens Frankie, isolating her from herself at various points on the time continuum: "Here we are--right now. This very minute. Now. But while we're talking right now, this minute is passing. And it will never come again. Never in all the world. When it is gone it is gone."<sup>1</sup> The relationship between loneliness and time is repeated even more explicitly in a reminiscence which Carson McCullers published some ten years later:

How could it be that I was I and now was now when it would be Christmas, wintertime, cold weather, twilight and the glory of the Christmas tree? I puzzled about the now and later. . . . Would the now I of the treehouse and the August afternoon be the same I of winter, firelight, and the Christmas tree? I wondered.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, Frankie's sharpened awareness of human mortality, coupled with the inexorable passage of time, contributes to her desperate need to "connect" with another, but the more urgent and loquacious she becomes, the more

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>2</sup>Carson McCullers, "Home for Christmas," Mademoiselle, XXX (December, 1949), 53.

futile and less meaningful are her attempts to communicate. The kitchen conversations with Berenice and John Henry have become repetitious and meaningless, and although Frankie's father "had ears to hear with, . . . he did not listen."<sup>1</sup> At the wedding, the plans which she has so freely spilled out to strangers are suddenly locked inside her; each time she attempts to describe them to Jarvis or Janice, "her tongue was heavy in her mouth and dumb."<sup>2</sup> The soldier "talked a kind of double-talk that . . . she could not follow."<sup>3</sup> Ironically, the single clear instance of communication she senses is with the Freaks, for whom she imagines a frightening kinship: "She was afraid of all the Freaks, for it seemed to her that they had looked at her in a secret way and tried to connect their eyes with hers, as though to say: we know you. She was afraid of their long Freak eyes."<sup>4</sup>

What Frankie cannot grasp is that each human being, limited as he is by his own individual perspective, encompasses within himself an element of incompleteness which appears freakish or grotesque to others. The Freaks are simply an extreme manifestation of the varying degrees of imperfection which disfigure every man, but Frankie is able to perceive this only in its most obvious form. She concedes

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<sup>1</sup>Carson McCullers, Member, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 137.      <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 18.



that the Freaks probably never get married or go to a wedding, but feels that the rest of the world is privy to that marvelous party going on behind the wall. Jarvis and Janice "have a good time every minute of the day,"<sup>1</sup> the soldiers "came to town on holidays and went around in glad, loud gangs together";<sup>2</sup> Berenice's two-room house has "the stir of company that [Frankie] had always loved and envied in that house."<sup>3</sup> Seen from the viewpoint of a lonely individual, a group seems joined and happily content, even when logic dictates that it is not.

Like most of Carson McCullers' characters, Frankie escapes from her fearful alienation into reveries as rosy and fanciful as narcotic delusions. Biff Brannon's imaginary parenthood, Mick Kelly's musical ambitions, Alison Langdon's dream of managing a prawn boat--all provide, in the face of an unpalatable reality, an illusory flight similar to Frankie's fantasies of adventure and faraway places. The seashell and snow-filled globe on her desk, symbols of her private day-dreams, help to ease the heat and boredom of the Georgia summer. And just as she protects her imaginary Alaska against the intrusion of Jarvis' letters, so she keeps the illusory wedding intact from Berenice's well-meant--and accurate--warnings. Like all extravagant plans for escape

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 124.

in Mrs. McCullers' novels, Frankie's scheme to join the wedding is doomed to disappointment. But so immersed is she in fantasy that eventually it assumes proportions more real than reality itself: "Because of the wedding, these distant lands, the world, seemed altogether possible and near. . . . It was the actual present, in fact, that seemed to F. Jasmine a little bit unreal."<sup>1</sup>

By the end of the novel, after Frankie has had to face the truth about the wedding, she has substituted new illusions: she will become a famous poet and travel around the world with Mary Littlejohn. Her insistently Utopian view of the future directly contrasts with Berenice's backward-looking dream of a lost Eden. Indeed, the obvious repetition occurring in the names of John Henry, Henry Johnson (Berenice's third husband), and Mary Littlejohn strongly infers that while the substance of one's fantasies may change, the necessity for them remains constant.

The forceful emphasis upon the need for illusion suggests a flawed and injurious universe, whose perversity menaces the spirit of man much as the elements threaten his physical being. The wasteful casualness with which John Henry's death is treated extends this implication, for it is never otherwise clear in the novel why violence and

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

death are necessary for Frankie's passage from childhood into adolescence. The beginning of autumn and the new school term would have provided a suitable point of transition, and if a more specific event were needed, the wedding itself could have furnished it. Of course, on the symbolic level, John Henry's death represents the necessary loss of childhood innocence as Frankie approaches the realm of experience, but on the realistic level, where each character has fully and persuasively existed, the sudden, senseless and dramatically unexpected tragedy simulates a world as irregular and capricious as the make-believe spheres of the Holy Lord God Berenice Sadie Brown, the Holy Lord God John Henry West, and Holy Lord God Frankie Addams. Indeed, just as each of them designs a world which appears perfect from his own biased viewpoint but lopsides and bizarre from any other angle, so the actual universe appears inscrutable and imperfect without an understanding of the Mind which fashioned it.

Berenice, accepting John Henry's death with her customarily resigned endurance, nevertheless gropes for a rationale behind it, seeking a universal design which would provide a reason for the tragedy, even if it is to be found in her own behavior: "'I don't know what I've done,' she kept saying."<sup>1</sup> Frankie, on the other hand, barely skirts the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 152.

periphery of grief, rapidly passing through successive stages of disbelief, acceptance, fright, and finally escapes into the new world of Mary Littlejohn. "It was seldom now that she felt his [John Henry's] presence--solemn, hovering, and ghost-gray. Only occasionally at twilight time or when the special hush would come into the room."<sup>1</sup>

Her reaction, especially when juxtaposed against the violent, consuming response which the wedding episode evoked, indicates how far Frankie has yet to travel along the road to maturity. But if, in the final pages, she appears more exasperating and less sympathetic than earlier, it is because the adolescent girl is not yet wholly attuned to her world. Just as Mr. Schwarzenbaum's piano tuning strums upon the nerves in the process of achieving an ultimate harmony, so Frankie must experiment with jarring notes while searching for her own sense of universal accord.

"Do ray mee fa sol la tee. Tee. Tee. Tee. It could drive you wild,"<sup>2</sup> she complains about the piano, not recognizing that her own actions are an equally insistent search for a Do.

"The old Frankie had never admitted love."<sup>3</sup> The new Frances will not admit pain, although it is there at the core of things. However, "weathers had turned and it was in

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 95.

another season";<sup>1</sup> as the novel closes, Frances hears the ring of the bell and goes to answer it, perhaps opening the door of the threshold she will one day cross. Hopefully, beyond Frances lies still another and more mature identity, who will eventually be able, like Berenice, to admit the full scale of human experience, a Frankie who will not be a member of the wedding, but of life.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 149.

## CHAPTER V

### THE BALLAD OF THE SAD CAFE

Rock meeting rock can know love better  
Than eyes that stare or lips that touch.  
All that we know in love is bitter,  
And it is not much.

--Conrad Aiken  
"Annihilation"

In the fictional world of Carson McCullers, the attractions which pass for love are consistently inexplicable and disillusioning. Nowhere is this more true than in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe, where the irrationality of human passion serves as the focal, unifying idea.

The fourth major work of Mrs. McCullers, Ballad moves from the warm realism of The Member of the Wedding into the symbolic exaggerations of allegory. As in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, the relationships of the characters to each other provide the principal source of irony, which in each case is a profound and pessimistic comment on the human condition. However, the diffuseness of the first novel is contracted in Ballad into a tightly constructed folk tale; the interlocking relationships, of a pyramidal pattern in Heart, here result in a closed circle--"love chasing its tail,"<sup>1</sup> as one critic has phrased it.

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<sup>1</sup>Klaus Lubbers, "A Study of Theme and Structure in Carson McCullers' Fiction," Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien, VIII (Autumn, 1963), 203.

The shortest of her novels, Ballad dramatizes a culmination of the author's philosophy of love in a singular triangle of three improbable lovers consumed not by their mutual desires but by their individual and solitary exigencies. The narrative action is an illustration and an extension of a sermon on the irrationalities of love contained early in the novel:

First of all, love is a joint experience between two persons--but the fact that it is a joint experience does not mean that it is a similar experience to the two people involved. There are the lover and the beloved, but these two come from different countries. Often the beloved is only a stimulus for all the stored-up love which has lain quiet within the lover for a long time hitherto. And somehow every lover knows this. He feels in his soul that his love is a solitary thing. He comes to know a new, strange loneliness and it is this knowledge which makes him suffer. So there is only one thing for the lover to do. He must house his love within himself as best he can; he must create for himself a whole new inward world--a world intense and strange, complete in himself. . . . this lover can be man, woman, child, or indeed any human creature on this earth.

Now the beloved can also be of any description. The most outlandish people can be the stimulus for love. . . . Therefore, the value and quality of any love is determined solely by the lover himself.

It is for this reason that most of us would rather love than be loved. Almost everyone wants to be the lover. And the curt truth is that, in a deep secret way, the state of being loved is intolerable to many. The beloved fears and hates the lover, and with the best of reasons. For the lover is forever trying to strip bare his beloved. The lover craves any possible relation with the beloved, even if this experience can cause him only pain.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Carson McCullers, The Ballad of the Sad Cafe (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1958), pp. 26-27.

From this discrepancy and tension between the needs of the lover and the beloved the central paradox of Ballad emerges: any love relationship, in opposition to the idealized conception, increases rather than mitigates the isolation of the self. The very act of loving implies a discovery by the lover of the self as a separate entity and entails the need for contact with another. Ihab Hassan has pointed out that the most startling consequence of the above passage is "love's avowal of pain, of death itself."<sup>1</sup> By seeking its own impediments in grotesque objects with whom a mutually satisfactory relationship cannot be established, love assumes a self-defeating nature which sharply curtails its redemptive powers.

Whereas in the earlier novels, the beloved responded to the lover with indifference or misunderstanding, in Ballad he unfailingly responds with hate--and not in spite of being loved but because of it! The obstacles to a mutually fulfilling love relationship are now insurmountable.

Because the central theme is so heavily ironic, the form, action and characters of Ballad draw more broadly upon irony--even verging at times on burlesque--than in any previous work. The realistic level is negligible; each of the three

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<sup>1</sup>Ihab Hasson, Radical Innocence (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 210.



major characters, didactically drawn to exemplify various aspects of the lover-beloved dichotomy, is an extreme, hyperbolic example of love's absurdities.

The interlocking relationships result from each character successively assuming the part of the lover, having scorned another who would play that role for him. "Each, then, is in turn a slave and a tyrant, depending on whether he is loving or being loved."<sup>1</sup> The pattern of unreciprocated affections is not dissimilar to the chain of relationships observed in Heart. However, in the earlier work, the design was pyramidal; in Ballad, the result is a closed circle.

Although Mrs. McCullers does not attempt on a realistic level to make credible the incongruous series of attractions, Miss Amelia Evans, Cousin Lymon Ellis and Marvin Macy are carefully drawn to dovetail with each other within the cyclic arrangement. The central figure is that of Miss Amelia, for the main action is her initiation into the ambiguities and paradoxes of love. A sexually ambivalent female of Amazonian proportions, she is akin to Biff Brannon, Captain Penderton and Frankie Addams in her rejection of her natural sex role. At a towering height of over six feet, she is almost a realization of Frankie's worst fears about herself. Her customary

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<sup>1</sup>John B. Vickery, "Carson McCullers: A Map of Love," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, I (Winter, 1950), 14-15.

garb of overalls and swamp boots, her short-cropped hair, and her muscular development typify her distinctly masculine bias, although she ironically insists on being addressed as Miss Amelia in the Southern belle manner. Nor is she consciously committed to the viewpoint of either sex, contemplating the male principle with the same inarticulate wariness with which she observes the female. Her two removed kidney stones, which she has enshrined in a curio cabinet, constitute a symbol of the male genitals, and these she regards "with a mixture of fascination, dubious respect, and fear."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, despite her wide-ranging abilities in the healing arts, at any mention of female complaint "she would stand craning her neck against the collar of her shirt, or rubbing her swamp boots together, for all the world like a great, shamed, dumb-tongued child."<sup>2</sup> She does not belong, then, to either the world of man or woman, but to the realm of things: "With all things which could be made by the hands Miss Amelia prospered. . . . It was only with people that Miss Amelia was not at ease."<sup>3</sup> Her isolation is effectively symbolized by her crossed eyes, which--like her spirit--turn inward.

Until the coming of Cousin Lymon, the only close human relationship she has experienced was with her father, who

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<sup>1</sup>Carson McCullers, Ballad, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

inexplicably called her "Little," a misnomer to which he apparently attached no ironic overtones but whose absurdities are obvious. Amelia's designation for him was "Big Papa." Together, the nicknames indicate a facet of Miss Amelia's character not otherwise obvious, her desire for male "compassion," but strictly within the context of an asexual relationship.

This one vulnerability is masked by Amelia's outward self-sufficiency. Singlehandedly, she owns and operates the town's general store, distills and dispenses its liquor, treats the sick, and handles her own legal affairs--of which, owing to her penchant for lawsuits and litigation, there are many. Her compulsion to make legal mountains out of molehills belies her given name, which has an obvious kinship with the verb "ameliorate." Thus her physically elevated position is matched by her social and economic stature, both of which intensify her isolation at the same time that they increase her renown. She is an emotional outsider to the society at whose center she exists: "she claimed kin with no one."<sup>1</sup>

Inversely, Marvin Macy is a social outcast, but claims familial ties with a brother and foster mother and emotional links with "several young girls who were clean-haired and soft-eyed."<sup>2</sup> His vocation of loom-fixer is ironic, for although he

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

can repair the machines which make cloth of separate strands of yarn, he cannot successfully weave his own isolated life with that of another human being. Handsome but ruthless, he is transformed by love of Miss Amelia from town rake to righteous member of the community. However, this metamorphosis is shortlived, terminating when he actually takes her for his unlikely bride and is then evicted from her bed and property after trying to consummate the marriage. Although he reverts to violence and crime, eventually drawing a penitentiary sentence, his rejection briefly makes of him a pathetic, suffering figure; decisively spurned, he at first can only offer more of the same devotion which caused his downfall originally, until he is literally and emotionally bankrupt. The futility of his generosity is reflected in Miss Amelia's ingratitude:

Miss Amelia was left with everything that Marvin Macy has ever owned--his timberwood, his gilt watch, every one of his possessions. But she seemed to attach little value to them and that spring she cut up his Klansman's robe to cover her tobacco plants. So all that he had ever done was to make her richer and to bring her love. But, strange to say, she never spoke of him but with a terrible and spiteful bitterness. She never once referred to him by name but always mentioned him scornfully as 'that loom-fixer I was married to.'

And later, when horrifying rumors concerning Marvin Macy reached the town, Miss Amelia was very pleased. For the true character of Marvin Macy finally revealed itself, once he had freed himself of his love.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

From this point on in the narrative, Macy fully plays the role of villain, although he did not deliberately "free" himself of his love, but was involuntarily "freed" from it--and by the very object of the same love! His immediate reversion to his old ways and his ready adoption of lawlessness perhaps justify Miss Amelia's reaction; but his behavior additionally suggests that in choosing the one woman in town most likely to repudiate him, Marvin Macy was seeking not love but a permanent vindication for his status as an outlaw. It also illustrates another paradox: love is most beneficent and transforming when it exists chiefly in the imagination. Only after Marvin Macy's marriage, when he comes to know (or ironically fails to know) his bride, does love fail him as a redemptive power.

Upon his return from the penitentiary, now bearing hate instead of love for Miss Amelia, Macy is able to attain by spite what all of his previous tenderness could not win for him. He enjoys the best and largest table at the cafe, at which Amelia serves him free drinks. He settles into Big Papa's ornate bedroom and invades the parlor, "the private rooms where Miss Amelia had lived the whole of her life."<sup>1</sup> And the unfulfilled marriage of eleven years ago is mockingly consummated in a passionate embrace of hate during the climactic wrestling scene:

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

Then suddenly Marvin Macy managed to catch hold of Miss Amelia's left arm and pinion it behind her back. She struggled and got a grasp around his waist. . . . For a while the fighters grappled muscle to muscle, their hip-bones braced against each other. Backward and forward, from side to side, they swayed in this way.<sup>1</sup>

The unlikely catalyst of this culmination is the hunch-backed dwarf, Lymon Ellis. Misshapen and ailing, he is an inverse manifestation of Marvin Macy's good looks and Amelia's robust vigor. Indeed, his appearance deviates so far from the norm that on his twilight arrival in the town, he is at first mistaken for a calf. Truly "a stranger in a strange land," he quickly establishes himself as the emotional and social center of the town, his easy gregariousness providing a direct contrast to Amelia's remoteness and Marvin Macy's defiance:

There is a type of person who has a quality about him that sets him apart from other and more ordinary human beings. Such a person has an instinct which is usually found only in small children, an instinct to establish immediate and vital contact between himself and all things in the world. Certainly the hunchback was of this type. He had only been in the store half an hour before an immediate contact had been established between him and each other individual.<sup>2</sup>

Some of his loquaciousness infects even Miss Amelia, usually "a silent woman, not letting her tongue run wild,"<sup>3</sup> and she and the dwarf pass interminable hours in conversation. But even when engaged in this mutual pastime, their antithetic qualities are conspicuous:

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 36.

Their approach to any conversation was altogether different. Miss Amelia always kept to the broad, rambling generalities of the matter, going on endlessly in a low, thoughtful voice and getting nowhere--while Cousin Lymon could interrupt her suddenly to pick, magpie fashion, some detail which, even if unimportant, was at least concrete and bearing on some practical facet close at hand.<sup>1</sup>

Cousin Lymon complements Amelia in yet another way in that he serves as a surrogate child to her. There is a strong element of maternal pity in her love for the hunchback, and she nurses him with the same tender solicitude with which she treats her child patients. "In relation to her [Lymon] is a homuncular incubus, the product of a nightmare marriage and the dark, secret perversion of her own soul."<sup>2</sup>

Not only do Lymon's defects evoke Miss Amelia's pity, but they are the exact condition of her love, ruling out, as they do, any possibility of a heterosexual relationship, which she fears. Lymon demonstrates his willingness to abdicate his male role by accepting and wearing an article of feminine attire, Miss Amelia's green wool shawl. Miss Amelia then makes him a present of her kidney stones set in a watch chain. This bizarre gift not only represents the connection between love and pain, but also indicates her willingness to relinquish the masculine-like domination with which her economic and physical attributes invest her. So perfectly do the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>2</sup>Vickery, op. cit., p. 16.

respective oppositions of this outlandish pair mesh that together, they form "one great, twisted shadow."<sup>1</sup>

Because he seemingly does not threaten her control, Miss Amelia freely makes Cousin Lymon a present of every element by which--in actuality--he is able to gain complete mastery over her. And, like Marvin Macy, Amelia must learn that love is simultaneously the condition of hope and the source of pain. For "even as she escapes from that constricting loneliness of which Cousin Lymon makes her aware, she loses her cherished independence. As in the case of Marvin, by loving she herself creates the beloved tyrant who eventually repudiates and destroys her."<sup>2</sup>

With Cousin Lymon's ultimate treachery in abetting Marvin Macy's victory in the wrestling match, the circle of unrequited love is complete. It is a manner of behavior foreshadowed in a short story written by Carson McCullers when she was seventeen and published some years later:

There is one thing I have learned, but it makes me feel guilty and is hard to figure out. If a person admires you alot, you despise him and don't care--and it is the person who doesn't notice you that you are apt to admire. This is not easy to realize.

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<sup>1</sup>McCullers, Ballad, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup>Vickery, op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>3</sup>Carson McCullers, "Sucker," Saturday Evening Post, CCXXXVI (September 28, 1963), 69.



Each character of Ballad advances this pattern one step further by not only "despising" his lover, but by turning his affections upon the lover of his own lover, creating an alliance with an apparent rival to protect his own identity against one who would "strip bare" his human defenses. "Lymon's adoration of Marvin Macy stems from a need to oppose a strong will to Amelia, a strength which, not possessing himself, he appropriates."<sup>1</sup> As Cousin Lymon gains in dominance over Miss Amelia, his character fluctuates from pathetic to exasperating to ominous. The potential for evil which lurks within him is dramatized by his fondness for chicken breasts, hearts, and livers.

To bolster belief in this weird triangle, Carson McCullers has set her tale in a tiny, Southern mountain hamlet that is "lonesome, sad, and like a place that is far off and estranged from all other places in the world."<sup>2</sup> The title infers a kinship with an ancient poetic genre, a kinship affirmed by certain ballad characteristics which dominate the work, such as a melodramatic plot uncomplicated by subtleties, which leaps from peak to peak of the action; objective narration recounted with a fateful intensity that refrains from

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<sup>1</sup>Wayne D. Dodd, "The Development of Theme through Symbol in the Novels of Carson McCullers," Georgia Review, XVII (Spring, 1963), 212.

<sup>2</sup>McCullers, Ballad, p. 3.

explaining or moralizing; depersonalized, symbolic characters immune to psychological or social realism; and an immediate, superstitious acceptance of supernatural elements. Ballad-like repetitive refrains both precede and follow the narrative breaks:

So for the moment regard these years from random and disjointed views.<sup>1</sup>

So do not forget this Marvin Macy. . . .<sup>2</sup>

So let the slow years pass. . . .<sup>3</sup>

That was the way Marvin Macy came back from the penitentiary.<sup>4</sup>

That is the way Marvin Macy crowded into Miss Amelia's home.<sup>5</sup>

That was how Miss Amelia was left alone in the town.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, the ballad-like form imparts a certain unity by both opening and closing the tale on the same note, a note of absolute desolation which matches the dreariness of the town, where "there is absolutely nothing to do; you might as well walk down to the Fork Falls Highway and listen to the chain gang."<sup>7</sup> The central action is thus framed by the song of the chain gang, whose symbolic significance is elucidated in a code subtitled "The Twelve Mortal Men." It

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., pp. 4, 71.

lyrically describes the changed song of the chain gang, working at gun point from sunup to sundown:

One dark voice will start a phrase, half-sung, and like a question. And after a moment another voice will join in, soon the whole gang will be singing. The voices are dark in the golden glare, the music intricately blended, both somber and joyful. The music will swell until at last it seems that the sound does not come from the earth itself, or the wide sky. It is music that causes the heart to grow cold with ecstasy and fright. Then slowly the music will sink down until at last there remains one lonely voice, then a great hoarse breath, the sun, the sound of the picks in the silence.

And what kind of gang is this that can make such music? Just twelve mortal men, seven of them black and five of them white boys from this county. Just twelve mortal men who are together.<sup>1</sup>

By serving as "a reminder that the piece is at one and the same time a literary ballad and a folk dirge enclosing a cosmic statement,"<sup>2</sup> the epilogue lends universal validity to the paradoxical and private vision contained in the central action. The gang, of course, is representative of all mankind, imprisoned by their common mortality and joined together by precisely what separates them, their spiritual isolation. For pain, not love, is the linking force among men. Temporary escape is possible through love, which, like the "both somber and joyful" song of the chain gang, briefly surpasses the painful reality of suffering. But the awareness of that

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 71-72.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Kauer Folk, "The Sad Sweet Music of Carson McCullers," Georgia Review, XVI (Summer, 1962), 202.

reality and the futile search of each lonely hunter for a harmony which transcends it can only result in a melody "half-sung and like a question," akin in its ambivalence to Biff Brannon's vision of "radiance and darkness."

The ballad qualities filter the incredible story through the dimness of distant legend. Folk narrative is thus transmuted into an examination of a universal moral condition; the imagination is drawn from what could be merely a melodramatic investigation of bizarre relationships to the preposterous ways of love as a power so bewitching that it subverts the natural bias of the self.

The cafe as a controlling image further unifies the story. Carson McCullers has employed this device elsewhere, notably in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter and the short story, "A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud." The image serves as a micro-cosmic reflection of what is good in the world at large, a common meeting place where otherwise discrete individuals may be, however briefly, "members" of an embracing society: "For the atmosphere of a proper cafe implies these qualities: fellowship, the satisfactions of the belly, and a certain gaiety and grace of behavior."<sup>1</sup> But the paradox contained in the title (for a sad cafe is no proper cafe at all) again defines the inherent tragedy of the human predicament. The

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<sup>1</sup> McCullers, Ballad, p. 23.

cafe is essentially an illusion, where the senses find temporary satisfaction and oblivion. So precious to the town because "there, for a few hours at least, the deep bitter knowing that you are not worth much in this world could be laid low,"<sup>1</sup> the cafe is doomed to destruction by the same force of love which gave rise to it: love is both the hope and despair of the human race.

The establishment, growth and consequent destruction of Miss Amelia's cafe parallel the course of her love for the hunchback. The action is contained in four main scenes: Cousin Lymon's arrival, the opening of the cafe, Marvin Macy's return from the penitentiary, and the climactic wrestling match. Amelia's inexplicably generous reception of the hunchback later contrasts with her inexplicably stupified reaction to the return of Marvin Macy. In both cases, Amelia's behavior stimulates curiosity and rumors, for she departs from what the townspeople have grown to expect from her.

The townspeople help to provide an objectivity that balances the tale between burlesque and allegory. For example, during Miss Amelia's wedding ceremony, she "kept making an odd gesture--she would rub the palm of her right hand down the side of her satin wedding gown. She was reaching for the pocket of her overalls, and being unable to find it her face

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 55.

became impatient, bored, and exasperated." Juxtaposed against this humorous exaggeration is the chorus-like response of the mountain folk:

But so far all had gone decently enough; the town was gratified, as people had seen what this love had done to Marvin Macy and hoped that it might also reform his bride. At least, they counted on the marriage to tone down Miss Amelia's temper, to put a bit of bride-fat on her, and to change her into a calculable woman.<sup>1</sup>

In another instance, Cousin Lymon appears as a parody of the traditional lovesick swain rejected by his beloved: "Sometimes the hunchback would give up, perch himself on the bannister of the front porch much as a sick bird huddles on a telephone wire, and grieve publicly."<sup>2</sup>

And again, the townspeople respond and interpret:

During these weeks Miss Amelia was closely watched by everyone. . . . Miss Amelia seemed to have lost her will; for the first time in her life she hesitated as to just what course to pursue. And, like most people in such a position of uncertainty, she did the worst thing possible--she began following several courses at once, all of them contrary to each other.<sup>3</sup>

As if to emphasize the dispassionate relationship of the townspeople to the central action, Mrs. McCullers occasionally pulls one of them forward from their distant mountain hamlet into the objective light of the present:

Henry Macy winked nervously and rubbed his hands together. Then quietly, he left the bottom step and disappeared. He

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 30-31.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 52-53.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 53-54.

is a good soul, and the hunchback's situation had touched his heart.<sup>1</sup>

The rumor was started by a weaver called Merlie Ryan. He is a man of not much account--sallow, shambling, and with no teeth in his head.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, according to Mrs. MacPhail, a warty-nosed old busybody who is continually moving her sticks of furniture from one part of the front room to another; according to her and to certain others, these two were living in sin.<sup>3</sup>

The interpretative role of the townspeople as a folk-style Greek chorus is made even more explicit by the manner in which they appear in tightly clustered groups to observe each of the major scenes of action: ". . . they are all alike in many ways as has been said. . . . So, for the present, think of them as a whole."<sup>4</sup>

The single identifying badge of this group is their suspicious inclination, their avidly malicious willingness to believe the worst of human nature. Yet such is the modifying influence of the cafe that, initially drawn to Miss Amelia's premises by rumors that she has murdered the hunchback, they remain to participate in the opening of the cafe, "polite even to the point of timidity."<sup>5</sup>

The liquor served in the cafe ("Perhaps without it there would never have been a cafe")<sup>6</sup> contributes to the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

favorably transforming effect. It is a transcendental liquor, imparting to the user a glow that sharpens his perceptions and illuminates the truth, paralleling the temporary but beneficent effects of love. The destruction of Miss Amelia's still by the vengeful Macy and Lymon thus assumes a symbolic value.

The boarded-up house, by the end of the narrative devoid of both love and liquor, stands as a monument to love betrayed. From its shuttered windows Miss Amelia's face peers, "like the terrible dim faces known in dreams--sexless and white, with two gray crossed eyes which are turned inward so sharply that they seem to be exchanging with each other one long and secret gaze of grief."<sup>1</sup>

There is an awesome finality to the vision set forth in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe: the irremediable flaw which exists in the nature of love sentences each man to the fate of Miss Amelia, self-imprisoned in a shuttered and decaying fortress of the soul. The image of Miss Amelia's face, "remarkable for its metaphysical fusion of horror and compassion,"<sup>2</sup> lingers as a haunting symbol of that vision.

The theme of the tale transcends the bizarre characters who enact it; although they are remote and fantastic as mountain spooks, in their futile embrace of love which is not love, they represent what is true of the human heart.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 3-4.

<sup>2</sup>William Clarey, Commonweal, LIV (June 15, 1951), 243.



## CHAPTER VI

### CLOCK WITHOUT HANDS

It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another. I didn't realize. . . . Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?--every, every minute?

--Thornton Wilder, "Our Town"<sup>1</sup>

Clock Without Hands, Carson McCullers' last published novel, is tied to the body of her other work by the same violent eruptions and sexually abnormal, spiritually alienated characters that mark her earlier fiction. Yet, the grotesque has somehow receded, the murky atmosphere cleared. The dread and uncertainty remain, but in a context removed from the province of nightmare. Clock signals a return to the more naturalistic diffuseness of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter and, like the earlier novel, centers upon characters whose lives are colored by contemporary issues.

A dust jacket statement by the author asserts that Clock "is about response and responsibility--of man toward his own livingness." This theme is developed in a context bounded by the story of J. T. Malone, a Milan, Georgia, pharmacist. He discovers in the opening chapter that he is

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<sup>1</sup>Thornton Wilder, "Our Town," A Treasury of the Theatre, John Gassner, editor (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964), p. 948.

dying of leukemia; his death closes the novel. His final months of life are touched by each of the other major characters: Judge Fox Clane, a prototypal, eighty-five-year-old Southern politician; the Judge's teenage grandson, Jester Clane, whose liberal racial and political views acutely distress the Judge; and Sherman Pew, son of a white woman and Negro man, who, abandoned on a church pew in infancy, knows nothing of his own parentage.

What Mrs. McCullers has intended within this framework is many-faceted: she has, first of all, attempted a paradoxical statement about the appreciation and awareness of life that sharpens simultaneously with the recognition of one's mortality; this idea is related to the theme of self-realization, whereby each character's search for identity hinges upon a confrontation with the unalterable fact of death. In addition, by using her characters as symbolic equations of the old and new South, she has endeavored to create an allegory of that region as it is gripped by the paroxysms of the twentieth century.

But rather than supplement, parallel, or illumine one another, the many implications of the novel frequently diverge, so that the sum total is confusion and ambiguity. Malone's structural position, which is similar to the frame provided by Biff Brannon in Heart, suggests that the livingness and death theme was conceived as central to the work. But after the first chapter, the focus shifts to Judge Clane and then to

Jester and Sherman; they introduce secondary themes and usurp the spotlight for the major portion of the story. Malone, whose life is only peripheral to theirs, never recaptures the significance which his tale initially promised.

However, the novel is not entirely disjointed. An interesting and illuminating pattern of character relationships emerges in connection with what critic Oliver Evans has labeled the "existential crisis"<sup>1</sup>--the achievement of identity through engagement and moral choice. Each character in Clock must grapple with the problem of his own identity as he approaches that cathartic moment when he can either recognize himself or be lost forever; the contrasting reactions of Malone, Judge Clane, Jester, and Sherman to their respective turning points provide an often telling comment on the necessity of understanding one's essential nature. Carson McCullers' basic theme of spiritual isolation is relevant to her last novel, but with a shade of difference: the loneliness which haunts the world of Clock is largely the result of the failure to understand and communicate with the self. The oppositions and juxtapositions of characters which evolve as an outgrowth of this motif furnish the novel's principal source of irony, upon which, in typical fashion, the author has depended for the development of her ideas. A successive examination of each of the four major characters will clarify the dominant paradoxes and ironies as they relate to the realization of

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<sup>1</sup>Oliver Evans, "The Case of Carson McCullers," Georgia Review, XVIII (June, 1964), 44.

Mrs. McCullers' thematic concern with the "existential crisis."

For Malone, of course, the crisis is occasioned by the discovery of his fatal illness. He shares with Singer, Pender-ton, and Berenice an awareness of human isolation, but his awareness is given a further dimension by the knowledge of his impending death. The paradox upon which his dilemma rests was first introduced into Mrs. McCullers' work in Reflections in a Golden Eye during the Captain's wild ride: ". . . having given up life, the Captain suddenly began to live."<sup>1</sup> In the earlier work, however, the idea that an understanding of life quickens in the shadow of death was subordinate to another theme; in Clock Without Hands it completely dominates the strand of action dealing with Malone and reverberates to varying degrees in the lives of the other characters.

In the stunned days following the fateful diagnosis of his illness, Malone is said to be "a man watching a clock without hands."<sup>2</sup> His days are numbered, but he cannot pinpoint the exact hour of their termination. In this sense, he is Everyman, helplessly watching time run out on his allotted

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<sup>1</sup>Carson McCullers, Reflections in a Golden Eye (New York: Bantam, 1958), p. 76.

<sup>2</sup>Carson McCullers, Clock Without Hands (New York: Bantam, 1963), p. 23.

life's span. But because the time of his death has been predicted within a three month margin (he has been given between twelve and fifteen months to live), he can more properly be said to be watching a clock with hands; contrary to the author's apparent intention, it appears to be the other characters--naively oblivious or stubbornly unaware that each day brings them closer to death--who are living by a clock without hands. In contrast to Malone, they take their "livingness" for granted, never comprehending that it "is made up of countless daily miracles, most of which are unnoticed."<sup>1</sup>

The meaning of the handless timepiece, like much of Carson McCullers' symbolism, remains somewhat ambiguous; but it signifies, in relationship to Malone, both a cryptic measure of man's finite years and, conversely, a unique dimension where time, unmeasurable by a clock without hands, has lost its tyranny. Reconciled to his death in the final chapters, Malone enters this realm when he pauses to consider the "little miracles" of life and to ponder the value of the moment independent of the time continuum.

Malone is bitterly aware of the disparity between his own transient state and the infinite nature of time (which Carson McCullers once characterized as an "endless idiot. . .

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 101.

screaming round the world.")<sup>1</sup> The pestle<sup>2</sup> which Malone contemplates early in the novel is akin to the element of time in its durability, symbolic of a universe that existed before his birth and will endure long after his death:

It had belonged to Mr. Greenlove--when had he last remembered him?--and at his death the estate sold the property. How long had Mr. Greenlove worked with this pestle? And who had used it before him? . . . The pestle was old, old and indestructible. Malone wondered if it wasn't a relic from Indian times. Ancient as it was, how long would it still last? The stone mocked Malone.<sup>3</sup>

"Death is always the same, but each man dies in his own way."<sup>4</sup> For Malone, the way is one of utter solitude; the death sentence hanging over him has imposed a distorted perspective, isolating him from every familiar landmark. His absolute alienation is spelled out in his very surname. Even more than Blount, he is a "stranger in a strange land." And yet because death is the universal fate common to all men, it is paradoxical that the specific foreknowledge of its arrival should prove so conclusively isolating.

In the manner of the medieval Everyman, Malone vainly turns to family, friends, daily routine, and religion for solace. However, the "zone of loneliness"<sup>5</sup> which surrounds

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<sup>1</sup>Carson McCullers, "When We Are Lost," New Directions, X (1948), 509.

<sup>2</sup>In its original form, Clock Without Hands was entitled The Pestle.

<sup>3</sup>McCullers, Clock, p. 21.      <sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

him, and to which he initially attributes his physical condition, has been a long time in the making. Despite an outwardly placid relationship with his wife, he no longer shares anything with her except the cares of parenthood. Indeed, secretly resenting the efficiency with which she manages, he wonders--much as Biff Brannon reflected on his own courting days--what became of the young Martha who wore chiffon dresses. Only gradually does he recognize that time has worked its changes upon him too. Turning for comfort to his friend Judge Clane, he at first is cheered by the skepticism with which the Judge regards the fateful diagnosis. But because the Judge is so totally self-absorbed, despite the reflected glory which Malone feels in his presence, no true communication is possible between the two men.

Malone's professional life, too, is suddenly meaningless; the patent cures which he has prescribed over the years now mock his own incurable state. A plain man who has never before questioned the "why" of his routine, he now ponders the insignificance of his life and of the wasted, directionless years.

When Malone attempts to find consolation in his religion, he encounters only empty phrases and glib evasions from his minister. Defeated by a world he sees as one of "incongruities in which there was no order or conceivable

design,"<sup>1</sup> and finally unable to communicate with anyone except in rage, he one by one exhausts all sustaining resources but his inner self. To his final horror, he finds that in the daily tedium of existence, he has lost even that. This realization is brought home to him when, browsing through a book from the hospital library, Kierkegaard's Sickness Unto Death, he is struck by a chillingly apt passage: "The greatest danger, that of losing one's own self, may pass off quietly as if it were nothing; every other loss, that of an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc., is sure to be noticed."<sup>2</sup> Recognizing at this point that he has long been spiritually dead, Malone sees himself as a personification of death-in-life. In an abrupt and irrational attempt to recapture his "livingness," he departs from his old behavior patterns, splurging on custom-tailored suits and long-neglected and expensive dental repairs. "So dying, Malone took more care of himself than he had done in life."<sup>3</sup>

However, he is still tormented by the ambivalence which suspends him between the unreconciled worlds of the living and the dead, until an incident of racial violence, providing him with the opportunity for moral choice, resolves his conflict. At a meeting where the bombing of

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 135.



Sherman Pew's house is planned, Malone draws the slip of paper designating him to do the job, and unexpectedly, he refuses: "Gentlemen, I am too near death to sin, to murder. . . . I don't want to endanger my soul."<sup>1</sup>

Following this action, Malone is able to relinquish his claim to life. His existence contracts until it is narrowly bounded by only the walls of his sick room. His final days bring him a measure of tranquility and self-acceptance: "He was no longer a man watching a clock without hands. He was not alone, he did not rebel, he did not suffer. He did not even think of death these days. He was not a man dying . . . nobody died, everybody died."<sup>2</sup> Near death, he ironically finds in his own selflessness--earlier a source of acute distress--the comfort he has been seeking during his final months: "But his livingness was leaving him, and in dying, living assumed order and a simplicity that Malone had never known before. The pulse, the vigor was not there and not wanted. The design alone emerged."<sup>3</sup>

Malone's conscious acquiescence to fate directly contrasts with his original response to his illness, when he unknowingly "confused the end of life with the beginning of a

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 215.

new season."<sup>1</sup> But despite the irony, his intuition is correct, for the progressive realization of his own mortality brings about in him a philosophical rebirth which defines the profound meaning of life.

The chapters of the novel dealing with Malone are among the most moving of Mrs. McCullers' work. The polarities of livingness and death between which Malone is caught create a compelling framework for an otherwise ordinary character, whose very commonplaceness, juxtaposed against his universal dilemma, invests him with an unforgettable poignancy. However, the climax of his development--his refusal to be part of the bombing plot--loses the impact of its intended significance, weakened as it is by Malone's motivation. His stand appears to be less a moral choice than an insurance policy against possible damnation, and because the question of sin and retribution is extraneous to the central theme of the novel, Malone's progression as a character--although thoroughly believable--is thematically incomplete.

Malone's character development is antithetic to that of his old friend, Judge Fox Clane. A stereotype of the deluded Southern politician who clings to a remembered glory that is more myth than history, he is pained by the disruption of the past by an obstreperous present, and chooses to

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<sup>1</sup>ibid., p. 1.

resolve the conflict by ignoring it. Therefore, any clock--with or without hands--is of little significance to the Judge, for his eye is stubbornly fixed on a remote point in the past, where time has stopped. His inflexibility, of course, cannot change the implacable direction of events, but because he is representative of a sizable and ultraconservative faction, it does suggest that the Supreme Court's "all deliberate speed" will also be measured by a clock without hands.

Fox Clane is a comic-pathetic creature whose given name is a mockery. Dottering and foolhardy, he lacks both the cunning and subtlety of his namesake. He is no stranger to death, having survived a brother, wife, daughter-in-law, and son. Yet he refuses to recognize the inevitability of death, calling it "the great treachery"<sup>1</sup> and consoling himself with an axiom gleaned from a woman's magazine: "How can the dead be truly dead when they are still walking in my heart?"<sup>2</sup> Although his large Victorian home is filled with remembrances of his wife and son, he glosses over the circumstances of their deaths, just as, years earlier, he refused to recognize the fatal nature of his wife's illness or to admit his moral responsibility for his son's suicide.

Even now, he will not outwardly acknowledge that he has suffered a true stroke--

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 81.

spoke of "a light case of polio," "little seizure," etc. When he was up and around, he declared he used the walking stick because he liked it and that the "little attack" had probably benefited him as his mind had grown keener because of contemplation and "new studies."<sup>1</sup>

His evasions contrast with Malone's behavior. Whereas the druggist initially has less difficulty in confiding his illness to Clane than in accepting it himself, the Judge, although minimizing his illness to others, "was truthful to himself; it was a stroke and he had nearly died."<sup>2</sup> Significantly, he can make this admission only when the immediate danger has passed and death is no longer an imminent threat.

The force which sustains him in the present is his dream of restoring the past by the government redemption of Confederate money. Just as he attempted to replace Missy after her death by courting women with reminiscent qualities (an echo of Berenice's efforts to substitute "little bits and pieces" of Ludie for the whole man), so he also attempts to resurrect an equally dead era by reviving a symbolic aspect of it. In this way, he hopes to turn the clock back "a hundred years"<sup>3</sup> and cheat death by achieving immortality. Foolishly, he fails to see that his dream is not only impossible but that it has occasioned still another kind of death:

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 144.

a break in his relationship with Jester. "For the break in understanding, in sympathy, is indeed a form of death."<sup>1</sup>

Clane's mental collapse, marked by the recitation of the Gettysburg address to protest the Supreme Court school integration decision, coincides in time with Malone's death, and the two events serve as foils. Malone, resigned to selflessness and death, has found order and simplicity; Clane is self-entombed in a dead past where sensitivity has deteriorated into sentimentalism and purpose into perverseness. By assuming that his original victory over death was an irreversible one, he has forfeited the awareness which redeemed Malone and can only babble the opposite of what he intends to say.

Just as Malone and Judge Clane manifest various phases of the identity and death motif, so Jester Clane and Sherman Pew, in their separate quests for their own identities, serve as foils not only to each other but to the two older men as well.

Sherman differs markedly from the Negroes in Mrs. McCullers' earlier fiction. Lacking the spiritual endurance of Portia and Berenice, without the impassioned but disciplined dedication of Dr. Copeland or the humanity of all three, he emerges as a somewhat contrived individual whose plight is pitiful but whose character is repugnant.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

His baffled search for a self ironically contrasts with that of Malone, for the latter has lost what Sherman has never possessed. Sherman's lack of identity, initially deriving from his foundling status, is complicated by his racial and adolescent ambivalence. Half white, half black, partly child and partly adult, his fragmented parts war with each other, resulting in the disintegration of the personality. He has been emotionally scarred not only by his own unhappy childhood, but predating that, by the conditions governing his conception and birth, and by all of the injustices perpetuated against his race throughout history. (Although his physical heredity is equally black and white, he is classed as, and identifies with, the black race as a matter of course.)

The pressures which weigh upon Sherman thus illustrate the presentness of the past, a paradox to which Sherman's particular clock without hands relates. The time element which it symbolizes is an inseparable blend of past, present, and future, immeasurable by any clock. Time does not move forward for Sherman; he is burdened with a century's accumulated resentments. In contrast to Judge Clane, who cannot effectively bring the past into the present, Sherman cannot separate one from the other.

The blistering resentment he harbors imparts to him the same misshapen appearance that marked Jake Blount:

Except for his eyes, he looked like any other colored boy. But his eyes were bluish-gray, and set in the dark face they had a bleak, violent look. Once those eyes were seen, the rest of the body seemed also unusual and out of proportion. The arms were too long, the chest too broad--and the expression alternated from emotional sensitivity to deliberate sullenness.<sup>1</sup>

Like many other McCullers' characters who create through illusion a defense against a world they are powerless to change, Sherman finds his own fantasies far more compelling and satisfactory than reality. "A lot of my life I've had to make up stories because the real, actual was either too dull or too hard to take,"<sup>2</sup> he confesses to Jester. The more marked his failure to establish an identity, the more elaborate are the fantasies he spins. Never doubting his assumption that his mother was an innocent Negro raped by a white man, he eventually indulges in the bizarre hope that Marian Anderson is his mother, going so far as to write her a letter addressed to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

Despite his admiration for Marian Anderson, his musical tastes run to "German lieder" rather than Negro spirituals, which he rejects as "nigger music."<sup>3</sup> Thus, although he indicts all white men as crazy, bigoted, and violent, he disclaims his own cultural heritage in favor of the music of a nation

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

recently guilty of the most staggering genocide in history!

His contemptuous treatment of Jester is a repetition of the lover-beloved dichotomy spelled out in Ballad of the Sad Cafe. A measure of the hate and fear he experiences in his role as beloved is reflected in the manner by which he reserves his severest and most demonic cruelties for those who love and trust him most. Perhaps he is the most conclusively isolated of all of Mrs. McCullers' characters; unable to accept Jester's friendship, he takes for the object of his own affections the shadowy Zippe Mullins, who exists within the novel only peripherally, never materializing as an actual character.

Early in the novel, Sherman is portrayed as fascinated by unusual words and expressions. However, his carefully accumulated vocabulary, a medium he uses to taunt Jester by making up non-existent and therefore meaningless words, serves not as a means of furthering communication but of blocking it.

The disclosure that his father was not the white rapist he has imagined but a Negro passionately in love with his white mother destroys his already feeble grasp of self. He is driven, in a desperate bid for attention, to make use of several "Whites Only" public facilities, but his infringements meet only negligible disregard. His ultimate defiance, the renting and occupying of a house in a white neighborhood, is a final compulsive response to his need to "do something, do



something, do something"<sup>1</sup> that sentences him to death as surely as his father was sentenced to die for transgressing upon the white world. Just as Malone has become resigned to death by accepting his own selflessness, so, inversely, Sherman accepts death as a means of rejecting a self to which he cannot become reconciled.

Sherman's discovery about his father imprisons him in a constricted atmosphere of "furniture" and "things"<sup>2</sup>; Jester's discovery of the truth about his father's death releases him from his adolescent quest to determine "Who am I? What am I? Where am I going?"<sup>3</sup> These are the same questions with which the other characters wrestle, but Jester is alone in finding a positive answer.

His ironic position as the "hated" and "feared" lover is an echo, of course, of similar relationships developed in earlier novels. In this instance, however, Jester's loneliness experienced as the lover in the inward world of his own creation awakens in him a positive resolution of conflicting emotions that strikes a new note in Mrs. McCullers' fiction. The only one of her adolescents to grow up, his advances on the road to maturity are paradoxically marked by homosexual passion and incidents of violence and death. With an earnestness that belies his name, he eventually discovers his self

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 182.

by a determination to transcend it:

Night after night he dreamed of his father. And having found his father he was able to find himself. He was his father's son and he was going to be a lawyer. Once the bewilderment of too many choices cleared away, Jester felt happy and free.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, when he achieves a transcendent view of earth from the airplane in which he has taken Sherman's murderer, he gains a new perspective on life and on himself:

Looking downward from an altitude of two thousand feet, the earth assumes order. A town, even Milan, is symmetrical, exact as a small gray honeycomb, complete. The surrounding terrain seems designed by a law more just and mathematical than the laws of property and bigotry: a dark parallelogram of pine woods, square fields, rectangles of sward. On this cloudless day the sky on all sides and above the plane is a blind monotone of blue, impenetrable to the eye and the imagination. But down below the earth is round. The earth is finite. From this height you do not see man and the details of his humiliation. The earth from a great distance is perfect and whole.

But this is an order foreign to the heart, and to love the earth you must come closer. . . . As you circle inward, the town itself becomes crazy and complex. You see the secret corners of all the sad back yards. Gray fences, factories, the flat main street. From the air men are shrunken and they have an automatic look, like wound-up dolls. They seem to move mechanically among haphazard miseries. You do not see their eyes. And finally this is intolerable. The whole earth from a great distance means less than one long look into a pair of human eyes. Even the eyes of the enemy.<sup>2</sup>

Following this revelation, Jester is moved to spare Sammy Lank, reflecting a perfect but unfeeling order (possible only in a distant view of earth) for a less controlled but warmer

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<sup>1</sup> ibid.

<sup>2</sup> ibid., pp. 208-209.

understanding of individual man. His evolving maturity and self-realization counterpoint the character patterns established by Judge Clane, Malone, and Sherman; Jester's particular symbolic clock is without hands because his potential development is oriented toward the future, a quantity that cannot be measured or clocked.

The symbolic structure formed by the interrelationships of Malone, Judge Clane, Jester, and Sherman to each other is obviously an equation of the contemporary Southern dilemma, intended as a political and social commentary. However, the ironic criticism which should result from this construction does not come off; the individual characters fail to support the weight of their symbolic roles.

Judge Clane is an obvious type, representative of the conservative, backward-looking South. But his advanced senility too completely absolves him of any moral responsibility, and his actions at the close of the novel suggest the sudden and total surrender of his particular class, an inference contrary to actual political fact. Jester Clane, as a member of a new and liberated generation, is clearly identified as one of the South's "men of good will"<sup>1</sup> in whom hope for the future lies, but although his development strikes the most

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<sup>1</sup>Donald Emerson, "The Ambiguities of Clock Without Hands," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, III (Fall, 1962), 17.

positive note yet in Carson McCullers' fiction, his effectiveness in saving Sherman from his fate or in acting as an agent of justice in dealing with Sammy Lank is more intended than actual. Sherman Pew, a personification of the newly rebellious Negro, is so much an outsider, so immoderately defiant and thoroughly isolated by his contempt and hatred, that he cannot represent an entire racial or ethnic group. Malone appears to be the conscience of the South, rejecting violence as a morally satisfactory solution, but his eventually submissive death in the final chapter confuses the symbolic implication of the novel by contradicting the positive outlook for the future which Jester's development supposedly injects. The political frame of reference achieved by the symbolic equations seems most effective as a parallel to and an extension of the asserted varieties of frustrated love relationships evolved in the novel.

Nor is the connection between the identity and death concepts ever completely defined. Each character finds (or fails to find) his respective identity in a death-related crisis, but the correlation (with the exception of Malone's story) appears somewhat arbitrary. Carson McCullers has emphasized the importance of "livingness" to a firm sense of "identity," but at the expense of incisiveness and cohesion.

The oppositions of past and present, self and selflessness, and livingness and death which the novel develops create

a keen sense of the ironical quality of life, but to no definitive end. The author has relied too heavily upon a political frame of reference to support a highly personal paradox. In her earlier works, the varying shades of irony which colored her novels were more directly related to the realization of theme. In Clock Without Hands, where Mrs. McCullers has attempted to include a wide range of material that does not blend well, the ironic polarities tend to divide rather than support the total work. The juxtapositions of character are interesting, establishing a pattern of counterpoint and contrast that illumines the basic thematic concepts; however, the value of this carefully developed composition is weakened by the failure of the various themes to cohere.

Carson McCullers is most successful, when, like Jester, she zeroes in more closely for one long look into a pair of human eyes. It is at the personal level, where Malone's story exists, that her last novel comes alive. For, despite its frame of social reference, Clock Without Hands is a definition of the fatality of man's estate, akin to Biff Brannon's momentary glimpse of the human struggle and the endless passage of humanity through time.

But Malone, in turn, is most interesting in the context of the author's other work: if, in dying, he perceives a transcendent order and simplicity in the nature of the universe,

it is an order "foreign to the heart" and foreign to Mrs. McCullers' basic viewpoint. Somewhere in the distance, counterpointing Malone's last peaceful sigh, is the song of the twelve mortal men. In the final analysis, it is the complexities of life and not of death, that bound the province which Carson McCullers has most effectively explored.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION

Why are we split upon our double nature, how are we planned?  
Father, upon what image are we spanned?  
Turning helpless in the garden of right and wrong  
Mocked by the reversibles of good and evil  
Heir of the exile, Lucifer, and Brother of Thy universal Son  
Who said it is finished when Thy synthesis was just begun.  
We suffer the sorrow of separation and division  
With a heart that blazes with Christ's vision;  
That though we be deviously natured, dual planned  
Father upon Thy image we are spanned.

--Carson McCullers<sup>1</sup>

What Carson McCullers has attempted to portray in her fiction is the experience of Everyman in his attempt to escape from the inevitable state of isolation which accompanies the human condition. The picture which emerges from an examination of her five major works is a somber one: man is trapped within himself not only by the duality of his own nature, but by the ambivalent, paradoxical nature of the world at large. The antitheses between which Mrs. McCullers' rueful heroes and heroines are caught are forever irreconcilable; it is the consequent "sorrow of separation and division" upon which her vision has fastened, ironically turning the failure of human communication into a communicable art form.

Each of her novels establishes opposing sets of polar claims whose resulting tensions create the consistent vein of

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<sup>1</sup>Carson McCullers, "Father Upon Thy Image We Are Spanned," from "The Dual Angel: A Meditation on Origin and Choice," Botteghe Oscure, IX (1952), 215.

irony which runs through her fiction. These oppositions are manifested in a variety of ways. One character (such as a Biff Brannon or Frankie Addams) may embody antagonistic traits which, producing inner tensions and turmoil, render futile any attempt at communication; or, inversely, a character (Penderton, for example) may represent a single facet of the human personality which so dominates him that, although drawn to other human beings of opposite inclinations, he fails to make meaningful contact with them. The very name of a character (Singer, Amelia, Jester) may contradict his essential nature and yet suggest the direction in which he yearns to grow. The self is, then, both the impetus and the obstacle to communication.

Polarities are sometimes inherent in the situations demanded by plot, as in Clock Without Hands, where Malone's author-ordained fate serves as a foil to Jester's self-realization and consequent sense of livingness. There is even an ironic tension existing between the objective, exacting prose in which Carson McCullers writes and the turbulent emotions that boil beneath its calm surface.

In addition, the thematic material which interests Mrs. McCullers underscores the "double nature" of the universe as she sees it. The various dichotomies of love-pain, reality-illusion, hope-disenchantment, and innocence-experience regularly recur as familiar motifs and provide major sources



of paradox within the context of her fiction.

Because Mrs. McCullers views love as the single means of escaping (however unsatisfactorily and temporarily) the spiritual isolation which is her primary theme, much of the paradox which characterizes her work derives from the conflicting emotions inherent in any love relationship. However, love is not to be interpreted purely in the romantic or sexual sense. As critic John Vickery has phrased it, "Rather it is the measure of the heart's desire, the goal of man's quest, and the image of the world he lives in."<sup>1</sup>

In her first novel, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, Mrs. McCullers has investigated the paradoxes of fraternal love; Reflections in a Golden Eye similarly explores the ironic aspects of twisted sexual love; The Member of the Wedding, familial love; The Ballad of the Sad Cafe, parodied romantic love; and Clock Without Hands returns to the love motif of her earliest novel to once more portray the vagaries of friendship and fraternal love. In another but related way, Heart, Member and Clock all define love in its universal essence, as a spiritual relationship between man and the world, whereas Reflections and Ballad represent love in its romantic or sexual sense, as a personal relationship between man and man.

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<sup>1</sup>John Vickery, "Carson McCullers: A Map of Love," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, I (Winter, 1960), 13.

The many outward deformities borne by Carson McCullers' characters not only symbolically reflect their twisted inner lives, but also serve to illustrate the irrational nature of love, which persistently chooses unlikely or grotesque objects. The lives of the physically afflicted, of a Singer or a Cousin Lymon, contain private tragedies of despair and isolation, but additionally--by force of the inexplicable absurdities innate in any love relationship--generate love and hold violence in abeyance for a redemptive, if fleeting, interval.

As a paradox of violence and calm, gentleness and cruelty, and beauty and ugliness, the force of love both binds men together and irrevocably separates them, for the lover and the beloved are from "different countries," and each brings to the relationship incompatible and irreconcilable needs. The chain gang's togetherness--twelve mortal men bound by their mutual adversity--is presented as the only alternative to the doomed pursuit of love; it is pain, rather than love, which forges the true bonds of brotherhood. Suffering emerges in the McCullers' world as the single constant, whereas love is necessarily illusory and ephemeral. "The burning point where love and pain meet"<sup>1</sup> is a locale to which Carson

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<sup>1</sup>Hassan, Radical Innocence, p. 206.

McCullers returns again and again and which provides, alongside the microcosmic cafe and mythical Southern town, the setting for each of her novels. The inconsistencies and mockeries of love, which thus contribute so heavily to her characteristically ironic viewpoint and tone, are first thematically developed in Heart and, although interwoven in each subsequent novel, most explicitly stated and illustrated in Ballad.

Another dichotomy which marks the work of Carson McCullers and provides her with a major source of irony is the split between reality and illusion. This is a theme as old as literature itself, but it acquires a distinctive coloration at Mrs. McCullers' hands as a corollary of her proposition that true communion between individual beings is impossible. Frustrated by the failure of communication, her characters seek refuge in a variety of impossible dreams. However, there is not a single instance where the author has permitted them to live by the illusions which they create. Although the dreamer's "inward world" is "complete in himself," as the reader is told in Ballad, it is not complete in itself. Again and again, reality batters down the protective walls of the inner room. Mick must eventually accept the fact that she will never become a concert pianist just as Malone must finally come to terms with the fact of his impending death. The shimmering impracticality of man's hopes is played off against his

justifiable fears in a series of interlocking contrasts that captures the veracity of both the worlds of illusion and reality.

Adolescents figure heavily in Carson McCullers' fiction, playing a major part in three of her novels (Heart, Member and Clock) as well as in several of her short stories. The ambiguities intrinsic to this time of life, juxtaposed against the relative maturity (or immaturity) of the other characters, create still another source of irony. Alternately wrenched by the divergent worlds of childhood and adulthood, Mick, Frankie, and Jester all straddle the unsteady rungs of life's ladder which lie between innocence and experience. The disparity between the naivete of the adolescent and the destructive nature of the world as he encounters it defines the area of his dilemma. His "dominant mode of coming to terms with the world is feeling, [his] prime mode of acquiring experience in dreaming."<sup>1</sup>

Each is sexually indeterminate: Mick and Frankie are the tomboys that their names indicate, and Jester has latent homosexual leanings. None undergo a complete sexual initiation. Although Mick and Jester are introduced to the act of sex, both fail to grasp the emotional range of its implications. This is in keeping with Mrs. McCullers' typically desexualized treatment of love.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 220.

The reality-illusion conflict is strongly dramatized in all of the adolescent characters. The innocence of youth fosters an idealism which creates a dream world where all things are possible, but where disillusionment is inevitable. Only Jester, in making the transition from hope to disenchantment, is able to synthesize reality with his "inner room" and face the future with renewed dedication. Although Jester's sudden self-realization is less than convincing, he is nevertheless the only one of Carson McCullers' adolescents to mature.

Her approach to the problem of good and evil is again paradoxical. Although the tradition in which she writes has often been traced to that of Hawthorne and Melville, her allegorical treatment of "the reversibles of good and evil" is rarely defined by clear-cut boundaries. One is often described in terms of the other, or both are represented within a single character, such as a Dr. Copeland, a Miss Amelia, or a Jester Clane--characters both sinned against and sinning, neither villains nor heroes, but rather what Ihab Hassan has appropriately chosen to call "victims."<sup>1</sup> Events, too, are presented in this shifting light; the values customarily invested in such experiences as birth, marriage, illness and

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 62-63.

death are so altered by ironic circumstances that one can almost agree with Hamlet that "there is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so."<sup>1</sup>

This wavering scale of values which permits Mrs. McCullers' protagonists to cut across the boundaries of good and evil in a single act (for example, Mick's ill-fated efforts to discipline Bubber following the shooting incident) precludes the possibility of categorizing her work as either tragic or comic. It is neither, and it is both. The author views life as both comic and pathetic; her heroes "are the ill-prepared and the ill-equipped; they seek not victory over life but a secure haven, and the struggle is not a glory but an almost unbearable violation of the self. Thus the dwarfed, the crippled, the undernourished, the black, and the tender-of-heart populate her stories."<sup>2</sup> John Singer, passionately committed to the cross Antonopoulos, never achieves the measure of self-understanding that might elevate him to tragic stature; reversely, Judge Clane, caught in a web of pathetic evasions and anxieties, is never just a figure of comic fun.

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<sup>1</sup>William Shakespeare, "Hamlet," Act II, scene ii, The Complete Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare, p. 1062.

<sup>2</sup>Hugo McPherson, "Carson McCullers: Lonely Huntress," Tamarack Review, XI (Spring, 1959), 30.

The author's carefully controlled objectivity, her refusal to directly judge or comment on her characters and situations reinforces the wryly ironic tone of her fiction. What might have been merely gothic, melodramatic, or sentimental is expanded by her characteristically paradoxical approach to encompass the universal condition of spiritual isolation from which all suffer. Carson McCullers once wrote on a journey south, "There is a strange sense of poetry in the ugliness, the drabness of things, and there is always the poetry of house and childhood, no matter how ugly it seems to others."<sup>1</sup> This viewpoint is typical of the author who has invested such bizarre and alienated characters as John Singer and Frankie Addams with a humanity so intense that they have become representative of all lonely hunters everywhere, strangely symbolic of a strange and paradoxical age.

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<sup>1</sup>Ralph McGill, "Carson McCullers: 1917-1967," Saturday Review, L (October 21, 1967), 31.

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